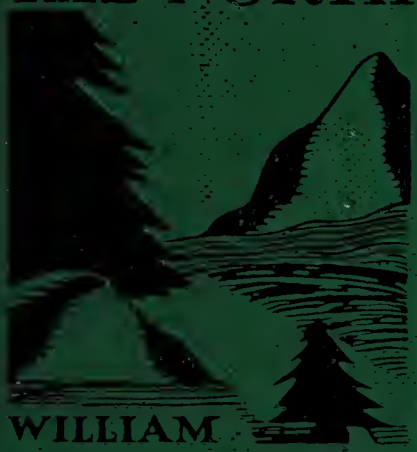
HEART OF THE NORTH



WILLIAM BYRON MOWERY

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HEART OF THE NORTH

BY

WILLIAM BYRON MOWERY

A. L. BURT COMPANY
PUBLISHERS
New York Chicago
Published by arrangement with Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc.
Printed in U. S. A.

Trent University Library
TRENT UNIVERSITY
PETERBOROUGH, ONTARIO

PS 8526 .O95 H4

PRINTED AT THE *Country Life Press* GARDEN CITY, N. Y., U. S. A.

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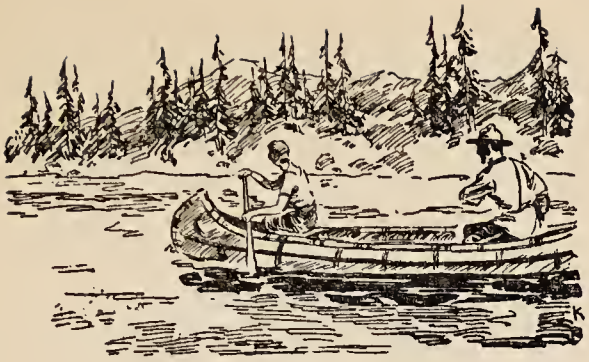

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CHAPTER I: THE KILLERS

FATHER CLAVERLY was one of the first to realize that the six men who had just come aboard the steamer were bandits.

Leaning against the rail of the *Midnight Sun,* he suddenly straightened up, stiff with shock; and stared incredulously at the six.

For moments he could not believe he actually was witnessing a robbery. Here in this Canadian Northland where outlawry was rare and furtive, here on the mighty Mackenzie where river boats time and again carried unguarded cargoes of half a million in furs and gold, a brazen daylight attack upon a big steamer was simply unthinkable.

Falling upon a quiet and peaceful scene, the blow had come like a thunder-yelp from a clear sky. Warped against a twenty-foot bluff at the mouth of a tributary river, the *Midnight Sun* was taking on fuel from cordwood piled there on the bank. Most of the crew had gone ashore and were singing a half-breed chanty as they fed the blocks to the long tin chute. Part of the passengers were asleep below. The others, walking the deck in the delicious morning air, were watching the two-o'clock sun swing up over the shimmering pine hills like a bursting blossom of orange and amethyst.

A few minutes ago the six men in a pair of birch-bark canoes had skirled out of the tributary river, the Big Alooska, and hailed the steamer as though they were merely trappers or a trading party wanting passage up south. A ladder was innocently let down for

them, and they had come aboard, taking a despicable advantage of the friendly, accommodating spirit extended from man to man in this North country.

Now, under the leadership of a huge red-bearded fellow, they stood on a pile of deck cargo amidships, watching each way. With repeating rifles alert in their hands, they loomed ugly and menacing over the crowd.

They had the drop—if only they could hold it.

Father Claverly, quickly recovering from his shock, stared sharply at the six men, trying to identify them. One was a 'breed; the other five were nondescript whites. All of them were unknown to him. It seemed impossible that six utter strangers could appear out of nowhere here in this sparsely-inhabited North. But not one of them did he recognize; not one man of them had he ever seen before.

While he was wondering what their next move would be, a girl among the passengers suddenly cried out:

"Bandits! They're bandits! Oh-oo——!"

To half the people aboard the *Midnight Sun* the girl's cry was a first warning of the hold-up. That was how swiftly the six men had struck; how contemptibly they had taken advantage of their fellowmen's faith and trust.

The chanty died away. The conversations, the laughter, the promenading stopped. Whirling, the passengers stood transfixed, staring at the six vicious strangers who had them covered.

It was a motley crowd that the bandits faced, a crowd typical of that Great Waterways country a thousand miles north of Edmonton. There were trappers bringing in their winter tucks of fur. Takudah Indians, spindle-legged, wrapped in lousy deer-skins. Two Eskimo families taking their children to the free mission at Fort Endurance. A sprinkling of Loucheux

'breeds, swarthy and sunny-hearted chaps. A party of five aviator explorers, whose planes had been wrecked on the Arctic Coast and who were going back out to the land of cities by way of the Mackenzie, Slave, Athabasca. A young government teacher, the girl who had cried the warning, returning home to Calgary from the school at Arctic Aklavik. And half a dozen free-traders, lone wolves of the northern bush, accompanying their baled peltry to Edmonton and a better market.

Fearful of bloodshed, Father Claverly glanced around at the crowd. Realizing that a fight would turn this deck into a shambles, he prayed that somehow, by quick thinking, he could avert a battle.

Though none of the passengers or crew had rifles handy, a good number of them wore belt-guns. There were courageous men among those fifty on deck; but only one man had the quiet deadly courage to draw a long belt-gun against six rifles.

He was Jimmy Montgomery, mate of the steamer.

Crouched beside a bale of wolf-skins, Jimmy had been pointing out things ashore to his four-year-old daughter, a little motherless sprite with pansy-blue eyes and golden hair. At the cry he glanced up, saw the bandits, understood instantly; and his face hardened. He was Mounted-trained, Jimmy was—seven years with the scarlet-and-gold Maintainers of the Right. Shoving his baby girl behind the wolf peltry, he whispered, "Lie down, sweet; keep down, *down;*" and rose to his feet.

His first bullet, fired from the hip, sang between two bandits and whanged into the pines beyond. His second knocked the floppy stetson from a bandit's head. His third was never fired. A Savage spoke out sharply. Jimmy grabbed at his breast, his revolver dropped to

the boards, he swayed a moment, then sank down, shot cleanly through the heart.

The echo of the Savage flounced back from the wall of trees and wound up the Big Alooska, farther and farther, till its last faint whisper hushed. In the stricken silence no one stirred. As the bandit, the dark-faced 'breed, pumped a fresh cartridge into the chamber of his gun, the empty shell rattled loudly on the deck.

Father Claverly heard a mutter arising among the crowd; heard the shuffling of feet, the half-hysterical sobbing of women, the snarling oaths of men. Out of the corner of his eye he saw men glancing at one another, waiting for one of their number to raise the long yell; and he realized that this ominous, swelling mutter was the prelude of a concerted rush.

The bandits realized it too. Fear sprang into their faces; two of them made half a motion to leap down between the piles of cargo that they stood upon. The priest's lips tautened a little with scorn. Those six men were cowards at heart, like most criminals he had known. All their bravery amounted to nothing more than a vicious, inhuman brutality, for now when a fight loomed they were cringing in livid fear.

It was plain to Father Claverly that they had not bargained on a battle, and were cowering at the prospect of rifle talk. But there was no retreating now; they would be forced to fight. In a flashing thought he visioned this deck as it would be a few moments hence: the criminals, rifle-armed, shooting from cover of the cargo piles; the blood-spattered promenade, with women and children caught in that swath of death; these brave friends of his, too good to be cut down by ruffians, recklessly lunging into the muzzles of those rifles and blotting out the six bandits—but at a terrible cost.

In the next instant Father Claverly saw how he might stop the slaughter.

Stepping forward from the rail, he up-lifted his arm to draw the eyes and attention of the bandits. Two of them swung their rifles upon him with a growl of warning, as though they believed he was raising his arm and voice to lead the rush. Oblivious to personal danger, thinking only of the innocent lives he might save, Father Claverly walked up closer, closer, till the criminals could have touched him with their guns. Either his calm mien or his black robe and hat had power over those rifles, for the muzzles swerved aside from him.

"Don't shoot again," he bade quietly, as one with authority. "You have killed a man. You have *murdered.*"

The dark-faced bandit who had fired the shot flinched before that steady accusing gaze, and turned his eyes away from Father Claverly's. He whined, pointing at Jimmy Montgomery's body:

"I was compel' to keel heem. He should not tried to interfere wit' us."

Father Claverly scorned so flimsy a justification of a brutal killing. Turning away from the bandits, he faced the crowd. Steady, clear, his voice rose:

"Men! Don't stir! Don't make a shambles of this deck. There's nothing aboard this boat as precious as the lives that would be lost. Let them take what they want and go peacefully."

His appeal fell on deaf ears. A slow vengeful wrath was gathering. . . . Jimmy Montgomery, known and loved all along the Mackenzie, lay murdered there on the deck. . . . Those killers were not going to escape scot-free. . . . They were going to pay for that barbarous crime.

The snarling oaths rose again; the muttering swelled audibly; hands crept down and closed upon belt-gun butts. . . .

It was the bandit leader who stopped the rush, who stopped it dead-short at one stroke. Swinging his gun at the young schoolmistress, Margaret Fournier, he ordered her, "Step up here, sister; step up close;" and when she obeyed him, wild-eyed with terror, he cocked his weapon with an audible snick and pointed it at her breast.

His voice rose so that the whole deck heard.

"*Now shoot!* You can't git me afore I c'n git *her!* First move I see made with a gun, I'll give her what that gent there on the boards just got!"

A silence, a frozen silence, followed his dastardly threat. His confidence flowed back visibly as he leered at the thunderstruck faces in front of him. Those men who in another instant would have been lunging upon him, now stood mute, paralyzed with fear for the helpless girl. With Margaret Fournier's life in the balance, not a hand stirred. Not a hand would stir—and he knew it.

After a little time he spoke to Father Claverly:

"You got the right idee: just let 'em be quiet like that. We ain't aiming to kill *nobody,* see? We're peaceful and quiet, and we won't shoot 'less they absolutely drive us to't. That gent had no damn business trying to queer our trick and pick a fight with us. Was *his* fault he got plunked. Let 'em stay back and keep their guns in leather, and nobody'll git hurt, see?"

Without turning or swerving his rifle from Margaret Fournier, he bade two of his men:

"André, you and John go below. Git the dust. Sort out some furs too, good furs, six or seven hundred

pounds—marten, mink, dark fox. You know what's light and valyble."

The two bandits stepped down and seized one of the crew and made him take them down the companion-way. Coming up presently, they lowered their booty into the two birchbark canoes that bobbed against the side of the steamer. They went back a second time, a third.

As though every man aboard realized that the bandits held the whip-hand, that no one dared stir, that retribution must come from elsewhere, a whisper started, spontaneously, from a dozen points at once:

"Baker! Alan Baker! Sergeant Alan Baker!"

The whisper went from neighbor to neighbor, from group to group; and men smiled grimly as they heard this mere mention of a man's name:

"Baker! Sergeant Alan Baker—at Fort Endurance."

A man beside Father Claverly heard it and commented:

"If Alan goes after them, or whoever goes, he'd *better take his luck along!*"

Another of the bandits, protected by that rifle pointing at Margaret Fournier's breast, walked boldly out among the passengers; and securing a fire-ax, he went from boat to boat on deck, smashing their frail sides so that there could be no pursuit, no retribution, if the two canoes could only get out of rifle range of the steamer.

Seeing now that the threat to Margaret Fournier's life had checked all thought of a rush, Father Claverly walked toward the stack of wolf-skins, crossing himself as he stepped over the darkening stream of blood that trickled slowly toward a scupper. Bending, he picked up the little Montgomery girl, who was looking

with wide, uncomprehending eyes at the body of her father. Mercifully taking her away from there, he walked over to the rail, holding the little tot so that she could not look back.

The man beside him said in a low voice: "Look at that devil smashing the boats! They must have planned that 'caution aforehand, so we couldn't chase 'em. But don't that big red-haired devil know we'll be splattering their canoes afore they get ten rods gone? Just wait; just wait'll they start away; wait'll we can duck below and get rifles! God!—what we'll do to them six!"

Father Claverly seemed to feel that others of the quicker-witted passengers were thinking that same thought, cherishing that same avenging prospect. It would be several minutes before those canoes could get out of rifle range. From portholes and deck rails a score of guns would be shooting at them. They stood not a chance under heaven of escaping alive.

The whisper spread. . . . "Wait! Wait'll they start away. . . ." Men folded their arms, and watched quietly, biding their moment of vengeance.

And then, when the canoes were loaded with their booty, when the two bandits had rejoined their confederates, the red-bearded leader played his last and best card. Flipping his gun at Margaret Fournier, he ordered her:

"Git down into one of them canoes, sister. We're going to carry you a couple miles up this Big Alooska here and set you off on a bar, see? Sorry we got a heavy load and got to travel fast, or we'd sure take you on along with us—sweet young thing like you. But we ain't meaning to do that or to harm you at all. Just start ankling over and climbing down into the boat. . . . That's right; that's a sensible girl. . . ."

He raised his voice so that everyone could hear; he spoke to Margaret Fournier, but his words were intended for the men aboard:

"Some of these fellows is figuring to shoot hell out of us afore we c'n git clean gone, see? But they'd better think twicet about that. And I guess they will. First hunk of lead comes whistling our direction, you'll git a bullet squar' atween them pretty eyes, sister!"

CHAPTER II: A NORTHERN MAN

At Fort Endurance, in his big three-room cabin overlooking the rest of the post, Alan Baker was changing uniform and making himself regimental again, after a four-day patrol to a camp of drunken Hares.

Through the curtained window he could look down the sunlit slope and see the Mounted barracks, the H. B. trading store, Factor Drummond's house, Inspector Haskell's cabin, the six other dwellings, and the Catholic mission with its school and tiny hospital.

On down at the steamer wharf several Loucheux Indians were basking on the cord-wood, motionless as gingerbread statues. Awaiting the arrival of the *Midnight Sun* and the chance to earn a twist of tobacco by tossing fuel on deck, they were gazing idly out across *La Gran' Rivière en Bas,* the great slow-flowing Mackenzie. Up and down the stream flackered ducks and geese and wavies; and out over the water, gulls wheeled on tireless wing, feeding on the dead fish of the break-up.

On either side of the mighty river loomed range after range of dark-green pine hills that stretched back illimitably into the savage, dimly-known hinterland. Unspoiled and beautiful, wild and elemental, it was a strong land, a frontier land. Freedom and exaltation Alan had found here in this far northern country where waters flow toward the Pole, and the nearest city is a thousand miles away. He had found happiness here,

too. Often, when the brooding spirit of this immense unpeopled waste was borne in upon him, his memory would flit back to that day, years and years ago in distant Toronto, when he looked out the window of an iron foundry and saw a young rabbit playing through the rain-wet bushes; and his work dropped from his hands, and he suddenly realized that the foundry and the city and his old life were a stifling prison from which he must escape.

Just turned thirty now, tall and lanky and powerful of body, Baker had shaken off the last vestige of an unhappy boyhood and his three harrowing years Across. He was in the prime of a virile and hardened manhood. After a glance at his big rawboned frame, at the aggressive slant of his lean jaw, one could really understand him walking lone-handed into a Loucheux or Hare encampment and setting it to rights with fist or club or effective language. Exposure to summer sun and winter woolly-whippers at fifty below had weathered his features to a smoky bronze, but without the Indian's undertone of copper. A long jagged scar across his left temple was a souvenir of a shrapnel bursting over his "pill-box" north of Amiens. But more than his towering six-feet-two or the boyish cowlick of his thick sandy hair, one noticed and could never forget Baker's warm friendly eyes, his high intelligent forehead and the driving power of his rugged face.

Coming here to Endurance as a corporal seven years ago, with Jimmy Montgomery and Curt Spaulding as his constables, he had speedily showed his worth as a "northern man" and a detachment leader able to cope with frontier problems. To him it was like coming into his own. In his boyhood he had daydreamed of hunting big game; and here, at this post just beneath the Arctic Circle, these daydreams had been realized,

though in a strange way. For here he had hunted the biggest of big game—human game that had intelligence to match against his; that carried a rifle in its hands, and wore a belt-gun, and must be captured alive, at risk of his own life.

During the years that he had been Officer Commanding here, he had built up an enviable reputation. With his gradually increasing pack of northern men he had successfully brought his big territory through Indian troubles and epidemics, and had smashed those lawless elements that came in with the oil-prospecting rushes farther south. To the plenty of bad-man 'breeds and Takudas and Hares of his region he had become the worst of bad medicine, with a bloodhound's nose for criminal doings, and an arm two hundred miles long to reach out into the bush and collar a culprit who fancied himself secure. Those *métis* and Indians who inclined toward trap-line thievery and whisky smuggling, always mentioned the name of Sergeant Baker with a low venomous *"s'pristi."*

With a record like that and with Superintendent Williamson as his friend, Alan had expected to get his commission last fall when the post was raised to an inspectorate. No one in all the Three Rivers country doubted that Baker would be the chosen man. To them, to Alan, the blow came unexpectedly. A political appointee named Haskell, a newcomer to the Force, a worse than raw newcomer to the North, got the inspectorship and command of this coveted detachment.

In these last months, Alan had been very thoughtful about his future. His golden chance, a chance which he knew might never come again, had been spiked. Here, at thirty, he found himself in a blind alley, a non-com on meager pay, with no hope of promotion. He had turned down the opportunity of going into a big min-

ing company that was prospecting by planes through the Athabasca country. He had refused half a dozen offers that held prospect of advancement and fine money. And then the Force that he had given such loyalty to had betrayed him. Worst of all, most stinging of all, he was forced to manage this territory still, straightening out the mistakes and enduring the arrogance of the man who had got the place he himself had earned.

As he brushed his sandy hair and dressed quickly, in a spare uniform which he kept pressed under the mattress of his bunk, Alan's glance strayed down the slope to Mrs. Drummond's flower garden, where bees were thrumming among the blossoms, and ruby-throated hummingbirds hovered on invisible wings, and brilliant butterflies were dancing in the pathways. Elizabeth Spaulding, his fiancée, the sister of his dead partner, was there. Deep in the middle of the garden he glimpsed the white of her dress, and over a bed of phlox he could see the shimmer of her hair, a lovely auburn in the mellow sunshine.

And Inspector Haskell was there with her . . . that blue and gold of his uniform, through the shrubbery . . . Alan wondered how many hours Haskell had spent with Elizabeth in these last four days.

He forced himself to stop glancing at them, and went on getting himself regimental again after the mud and sweat of the patrol.

Commanding all the other buildings at Fort Endurance, his cabin, which he and Curt Spaulding had built for themselves one summer, was light and airy from generously-big windows; homelike with fireplace, bookshelves, radio, flower pots on the ledges; and comfortable with good furniture which Jimmy Montgom-

ery had turned over to him when Jimmy's young wife died. The floor was luxuriously carpeted with golden-white rugs of polar bears and silver-flecked pelts of grizzlies which he had shot on patrols westward to the sub-Arctic Rockies. But in spite of its comforts after barrack life, the cabin was lonely to Alan. Eighteen months rolling by had not made him forget a dead partner. Every log and every nail in the building held some memory of Curt Spaulding; and Curt's picture, his chevrons, his empty gun, were poignant reminders of that fatal patrol a year ago last January. . . .

When he finished dressing, Alan stepped over to a deep alcove, a sort of library and study—a tiny niche for a man so tall and lanky. Above the work-table hung a shelf of dog-eared books and three pictures framed in carved walrus ivory. One was of Elizabeth Spaulding taken two years ago when she came down north to this Waterways country to live with Curt, her brother. Another was of Jimmy Montgomery in jaunty "walking-out" uniform, taken before Jimmy got his raw deal from headquarters and bought out of the Mounted.

The third was of Curt Spaulding. And that picture, flanked with the chevrons and the belt-gun, hung more prominently than even the other two, as though, with that face always in front of him, Alan felt less lonely for his dead partner and could imagine Curt here in this cabin still.

At times, reading late into the night, he would glance up and meet those eyes looking eternally down at him, and would think back across all the wilderness trips, the Indian troubles, the defeats and triumphs which he and Curt had gone through together since "Awkward Squad" days in Regina; and the haunting memory of that fatal patrol would come jigging into his brain. In

Curt's death he had lost the best and truest friend he had ever had or ever would have; and he knew that through all the years of his life he would be lonely for that strong handclasp and a voice he once had known.

The northern mail had come down from Chipewyan during Alan's absence those last four days. A couple letters from relatives in Toronto lay on his desk, along with a request from Superintendent Williamson about a census of the Indian bands in this territory. The document was directed to Haskell; but the inspector, after penciling on it some bungling orders to show his authority, had turned the matter over to experienced hands.

From a little pigeonhole between two logs—a secret mailbox for himself and his hard-working men—Alan pulled out a scrawled note from Corporal Bill Hardsock. He had to smile as he read, for the note was so like Bill.

Somebody found an awfully dead Smoky on a mud bar downriver this side the Big Alooska, Alan. He probably got drownded in the break-up but I'm going down to see who he is so's he won't be drawing treaty money by proxie for the next 20 years. Will be back when I get back, and take my time too; when you're gone that Spring-heel Johnny rides *me,* and I'll play Sammy-hell policing up his cabin.

Tearing the note carefully to bits, Alan sat down to write out the report of his last patrol. But his pen would not move. His thoughts strayed to Elizabeth in the garden; to Haskell, there with her. He knew that these trips he constantly was sent on, these trivial assignments that took him away for days at a time, were deliberate on Haskell's part, to get him out of the road. With anger at this gross abuse of authority, he thought: "If Haskell could come within a mile of man-

aging this post himself, he'd frame some detail to keep me out in the bush altogether. Any person who'll wield his official power in a personal matter like this . . . They used to cut off a knight's spurs with an ax!"

Unconsciously he turned to the window at his elbow and his glance went down to the garden. Haskell had just left it, and was walking out along the terrace. Swishing angrily at dandelions with his cane, he seemed to be in a temper at something that had happened between Elizabeth and himself.

Elizabeth had risen too. She was coming up the slope toward the cabin. Alan knew she had seen him return and was coming here to talk with him.

He knew, too, the tremendous question she was going to ask. On lone patrols he had debated that question for weeks. But he had no answer for it.

His report forgotten, he watched her as she drew near, bareheaded in the sun, a tall graceful girl, neat and cool in white dress with a nosegay of primulas at her breast. How strikingly she resembled Curt, he thought. The same hazel eyes, the same tint of auburn hair, the same sharp-chiseled features, though hers were girlish and of finer cast.

There was little passion in Alan's emotions toward Elizabeth, but there was a sturdy loyalty and a certain blind idealization of her as a girl. In that fatal patrol he and she had suffered a mutual loss of partner, brother. During the eighteen months since then, he had been her only friend here at Endurance, for even Mrs. Drummond, with whom she was living, did not like her. To have a girl so dependent upon him, not only for friendship but for maintenance itself, aroused a very tender and protective attitude in Alan.

But at times, deep in his heart, he was troubled about his engagement to Elizabeth. At times the fear rose in

him that their marriage was going to be a terrible mistake. Something lacked in their betrothal; they weren't the deep and intimate friends they should be. It seemed to Alan that he could never penetrate to Elizabeth's thoughts and emotions. Her cool reserve always shut him out. She made him feel confused, uncertain, like one wandering in a fog.

It shocked him to realize he was going into marriage with a girl knowing he did not love her wholeheartedly. In brooding hours, when he thought of another girl in his life, of Joyce MacMillan and his comradely intimacy with her, the old longing for that deeper and richer relation surged through him. He grew bitter at the secret powerful circumstances which had separated him from Joyce; which he kept locked within himself, telling no one, neither Joyce nor Elizabeth.

To other folks at Endurance, Alan's engagement to Elizabeth Spaulding had come as a staggering surprise. Knowing nothing of the all-powerful reason which had driven him to that engagement, they felt he had treated Joyce MacMillan rather badly; and not even their friendship for him would make them accept Elizabeth.

Mrs. Drummond did not understand why Elizabeth had to be so helpless and dependent upon a man when she was twenty-some years old and had a good schooling, and the agencies up and down the Waterways were begging for teachers. Or what particular cause she had for being so supercilious with the folk here and calling them "backwoods." Bill Hardsock, who believed in calling a spade a spade—and then some—had an opinion of her which only his respect for Alan kept him from voicing. Bill considered her "plain lazy, and snooty, and something of a gold-digger, and

no self-respecting girl would keep on taking money from a man, engaged or not."

But Father Claverly's opinion, gentle, deep-seeing, was the most devastating of all, because it *was* so gentle and meditative. He alone, of all the people at Endurance, knew that there was something back of that engagement which Alan had kept to himself—some hidden reason, some unalterable fact, that would explain it. At first he had thought that the profound shock of a partner's death had caused Alan to turn to Elizabeth; but with the passing months he became convinced the reason was not that. It was something deeper and more lasting.

With infinite sorrow Father Claverly had seen Alan's fine comradeship with Joyce break up and had watched the engagement come about. He saw that Elizabeth was a wise, cool-headed girl, very clever at managing relationships for her own ends. Her philosophy was to get all she could out of life, not by working for it, but by cleverness and by taking advantage of personal bonds. Whether or not she had given herself to Baker, he was not certain, but he did know that with her it would be a question of policy, not of character. There was in Baker a certain tendency to give his strength and protection freely to others who needed it. He was magnificently unselfish to the point of weakness. In the good priest's opinion the marriage of this cool-headed, calculating girl to a man so sincere and warm-hearted, would be a sorry, sorry pass.

When Elizabeth came in the door, she merely nodded to Alan's warm greeting. In her precise tones she said:

"I want to talk to you, Alan, about something very important to us both. Unless you're too busy . . ."

Her rebuff hurt Alan. Her coldness, her lack of any passion, were always bewildering to him.

Waiting, painfully aware he could never answer her arguments, he glanced out the window at the river and shimmering pine hills. A mile down the broad Mackenzie a canoe, a small patrol craft with outboard motor, came whipping around a headland where Keewatin spruces marched down to the water edge. The solitary, uniformed figure in the stern was driving it at a reckless clip, entirely heedless of stray ice-cakes still floating down from Strong-Woods tributaries. Half-leaping over the water, it scattered a flock of pintails right and left as it streaked through a field of slob-ice and skimmed on up toward the Mounted post.

Alan thought: "That's Bill Hardsock coming. And coming wide open. Something's happened. A dead Indian on a mud bar would never bring him home that fast."

Elizabeth saw the craft too. But she glanced only once at it, entirely uninterested. Police work—patrols, arrests, map surveys, treaty money, pelts to be stamped, bickering Indians—all this bored her, now that the novelty of it had worn off. She never had understood how her brother could become attached to so crude and backwoods a profession when good positions at Winnipeg and Calgary had been offered him.

Her eyes came back to Alan, and with cool impersonal gaze she studied this man who was to be her husband.

She loved Alan—with reservations. She admired his natural-born leadership over other men; admired his rugged honesty, especially in contrast to Haskell's lack of it. In their life together Alan would always be loyal to her; she could always depend upon Alan Baker. And he could get her what she wanted of life. Much better

than he himself did, she realized he had qualities that would take him far in any other profession: a good intellect, ambition, the ability to work hard, and—most valuable of all—a rare capacity for friendship. More than any person she had ever known, he seemed to be a collector of stanch warm friendships. She saw the inestimable worth of this talent which made people instinctively like him. Elsewhere, in another profession, he would put that quality to good use in advancing himself.

All in all, Elizabeth felt that if only he did not choose to bury himself here in this northern backwoods Alan Baker was by far the likeliest man, of the four or five she had known well, to lift her out of genteel poverty to a more agreeable plane of life.

She said, "You know what I want to talk about." She asked pointedly, "When your term is up next month, are you going to reënlist or not?"

Alan stirred uneasily, forgetting Bill Hardsock and the approaching canoe. Elizabeth was demanding an answer, and how could he answer so tremendous a question with a yes or no?

He knew that Elizabeth was determined, heart and soul, that he should get out of the Mounted and take a good-salaried position down in Victoria which Colonel Steele, commander of his regiment in the war, had been wanting him to accept. But he was loath to take a job on a friendship basis; he preferred to stand on the more self-respecting ground of honest work honestly performed. And to leave this land where he had found freedom and happiness was an intolerable prospect. He loved this northern Mackenzie country as intensely as he hated the hectic stifling oppression of city life; and his comradeship with men like Bill Hardsock was precious to him.

If he tore himself away from all this, if he became a mere cog in an industrial machine, he would be uprooted and miserably unhappy.

But as things stood, he was in a blind alley: Haskell was riding him hard for personal reasons; a rank injustice had been done him. . . . There were a dozen powerful arguments on the other side, too.

After a moment he said slowly: "I suppose I oughtn't to sign on again. But it's hard to decide, Elizabeth."

"What is there to decide about? How can you tolerate this situation you're in? You're a subordinate, taking orders; you're liable to be demoted any day; you're compelled to do another man's work for him! You don't think your situation is going to change? You aren't expecting a commission any more now, I hope?"

"I'm not!" A bitterness welled up in his voice. "I got that knocked out of me. I might get transferred as sergeant to another post where I'd be O. C., but that's the limit of what I can expect."

"You're not in love with service and 'loyal' to it?"

"Please don't be sarcastic, Elizabeth. I don't give a rap about service as such. It's taken ten good years of my life; it killed my best friend; it demands everything of a fellow and gives nothing."

"If you feel that way, then why under heaven do you want to stay?"

Alan started to answer, but he checked the words. His reasons were deep and intangible things—his friendships, the freedom he'd found here, the sense of being rooted in the country, his ramified duties that held him with invisible bonds, his unwillingness to desert comrades when they sorely needed him, his reluctance to give the impression of having quit just because a commission was not forthcoming.

Down on the river Bill Hardsock came skimming full-tilt up to the landing, swerved the canoe around in a complete circle to stop it, leaped out upon the planking, tossed the painter to a sleepy Loucheux. The pack of half-wolf Police huskies, patrolling the water edge for fish, trotted up to him, tails arched jauntily over their backs, and smelled his pockets for tidbits and nudged his hands with their cold black muzzles. But Bill had no time for them now and he did not seem to notice Inspector Haskell only a couple rods away. At a lope he headed up the terrace, straight for Alan's cabin, as though Alan was the man to hear his news.

"If you had nothing to turn to," Elizabeth persisted, "it would be a little different. But you've got a position waiting, at four times your present salary, with advancement sure, with a chance to make even more on the side." She broke off: "But what's the use of going over and over these arguments? We've gone over them a dozen times. I didn't come for that."

She paused a second, to emphasize her next words. Looking at Alan with passionless eyes, she said:

"If you intend to stay in the Mounted, I wish you would tell me so frankly, so that I can plan. . . ."

It was an ultimatum. She meant it so; Alan understood it so. But she saw too that it had antagonized him a little. Though she must be firm now, she must head off any antagonism.

Dropping her coldness, she got up and stood beside him where he sat on the corner of the table.

"Alan! Don't you realize how intolerable it is for me—not being with you two hours in a whole week? And if we were married, he—Haskell—he'd make it even worse. *You* know why he's sending you out on

these patrols and letting you be here just long enough to manage the post. When you're gone he forces his company on me. If I'd repulse him, he'd—he'd take it out on you! I've got to let him——"

A slow red crept into Alan's face and his fist clenched. He had wondered, sometimes with nameless suspicions, why she allowed Haskell to be so much in her company. Mrs. Drummond and others had hinted about it to him, implying it was not very honest of her. Here was the reason! It had never occurred to him that Elizabeth had been permitting it for his sake.

Elizabeth saw she had touched a sensitive spot with him and had cleverly twisted this circumstance to her own purposes. She went on:

"And Alan, I don't like to see him getting the credit for what you and your men do. But he gets it! All he knows how to do is to send in the report of your patrols, but he's O. C. here now; and the more efficiently you manage his territory, the more credit to him. You're working for *his* reputation, for *his* advancement all the time. I don't like to see you wasting your ability in that fashion. Or wasting it at all in service, when you could—and *you would*—be doing so much better outside. And Alan, I would like—I know it's selfish of me—but I would like to live in Victoria."

Alan was all confused by this sudden change in Elizabeth. A few moments ago she had been cold, passionless. Now she seemed very near to him, urging arguments a man could scarcely resist.

He thought: "I can't blame her for not wanting to live here in the North. Her brother died here; she hasn't any friends; these folks don't understand her. If she wants to live in a city, that's as natural, as much her right, as my wanting to live in this North country. She'd like to have pleasures, clothes, and other

things we'll have when I take that Victoria job. Wouldn't *any* girl want them?"

Elizabeth went on, confident now, toying with a button on his jacket: "And Alan, we could be married right next month, in Edmonton; and we could spend weeks and weeks on a honeymoon in the Blackfoot Selkirks where I went once with—with a girl friend of mine; and then in September we could go on across to the coast—couldn't we, Alan?"

Bill Hardsock came past the alcove window, hatless, excited. Elizabeth saw him, and realized her talk with Alan was broken. But she did not greatly care. She had given him her ultimatum, she had headed off any antagonism; and what she said about Haskell had galled him as nothing else could have done.

Reading the signs, she knew that though he was still wavering, still undecided, it was only a question of time till he would be out of the Mounted.

She half-whispered, running her fingers through his hair, "You've been here less than an hour, we've had less than ten minutes together, and now—now something else happens and you'll be gone again." She kissed him quickly and turned away.

At the door she met Bill Hardsock. With something of aversion in her glance, she tripped past Bill, not speaking, and left the cabin; and started down toward the factor's house, where Mrs. Drummond had lunch ready.

CHAPTER III: FATAL ORDERS

As Bill Hardsock stamped into the cabin, Alan stared in amazement at his subordinate. Normally as unexcitable and workaday as any plow horse, Bill was breathless and wide-eyed now, with his fiery-red hair all tousled and big drops of sweat on his bulldog face.

A couple years younger than Alan, stockier, half a head shorter, Bill was a rough nugget of pure gold. Since Montgomery bought out and Spaulding died, he had been Alan's right hand in managing this territory. Alan felt a little nearer to Bill than to the other men here. By his praise and repeated recommendations he had got Bill a corporalcy, though down in a Border detachment where strait-laced army discipline was enforced, Bill's slouchy clothes and informal manners toward superior officers would have kept him a buck cop always.

He burst out: "Oh Lord, Alan, Sammy-hell sure popped down river! The *Midnight Sun,* bringing up a raft of furs from the Ramparts country, and gold dust too, a whole wad of it from the Peel and Arctic Red Placers. . . . Down there, mouth of the Big Alooska, when she was taking on wood, half a dozen men bounced her in broad daylight, and robbed her there, right this close to us——"

"Robbed her? *Wh-aa-t!*"

"That's what they did. They came over the side like as if they were ord'nary trappers; they got a clean drop on the crowd, and had the run of the boat for better'n half an hour!"

Alan leaped to the all-important question. "They didn't escape, Bill? They didn't get by with a trick like that?"

Scarcely hearing him, Bill kept pouring out his news. "They took more'n three hundred pounds of dust, and sorted out half a dozen packs of the best and lightest furs. Alan, they shot and killed Jimmy Montgomery! He was the only one that drawed a gun against 'em, and a rifle bullet got him cold."

Alan's face went pale. The news of the robbery had been dazing enough to him; but now, this crashing shock of Jimmy's death . . . He could not seem to believe. It was not a thing to be realized or felt to its depths, in a single moment. His lips fashioned silently, "They killed Jimmy. . . . A rifle bullet. . . . He was the only one who drew a gun——" But he could not speak; he could only stare at Bill.

"And if Father Claverly hadn't stepped in and helped stop a rush, Alan, they'd have shot up the whole deck. They slung the dust and furs into their canoes, and . . . Did they get away? What brought me busting up the river? I hope they did—clean, slicker'n a whistle!"

In the pause then, Alan fought to shake off his daze. He had to make the plans, fling out a patrol, get into action. It was all in his hands—the pursuit, the capture, the whole heavy responsibility.

He demanded: "Who were they? Trappers, did you say?"

"Un't know who, Alan. But strangers. Five whites and one 'breed. That's what Skipper Ashmun said they looked like."

"*Strangers?* Can't be! Not in this country."

"But that's what they were. Nobody on the boat had ever seen a single one of 'em."

Alan did not believe this, but for the moment he passed it up.

"Which way did they go? Have motors on their canoes?"

"No. Paddle craft. They whipped up the Big Alooska."

For a little space Alan stood thinking. Why had those bandits staged their robbery there at the mouth of the Alooska, instead of farther down north, at some lonely reach along the Mackenzie? In an instant he saw the answer to that question. Swiftly picturing the Alooska country, he realized how shrewd their choice had been. They had chosen with an eye to a quick escape, an escape to the best hiding place in all Mackenzie Territory.

As he imagined them whipping up the Big Alooska, whipping up that lonely spruce-buried river past MacMillan's trading post, his thoughts leaped to Joyce, and a fear came into his eyes.

Echoing this very fear, Bill said: "They'll have to pass MacMillan's place, Alan. Ten chances to one, Dave's gone out somewheres after spring peltry and Joyce is there all by herself. . . ."

"But maybe they won't stop," Alan argued. His words were more a prayer for Joyce. "They'll probably try to sneak past. . . ." He broke off: "Bill, go down to barracks, find Ped, tell him to get the launch in shape to *travel.* Tie a couple light paddle-canoes onto the boat. Roll our things all together, and don't let it take you more than five minutes. While you're doing that, I'll go tell Haskell."

Halfway down the slope Alan came upon Constable Larry Younge, who was spreading Haskell's bedclothing on the grassy terrace to sun.

An older man, past forty, a native of this Water-

ways country, Larry had spent his boyhood years living with Crees and Chipewyans; and by easy odds he was the best bush detective in the whole division. In the woods he could beat the keenest of the Indian trailers. Nothing escaped his sharp eyes: a bent twig, a waterfowl flushing, a bird's alarm call, a faint moccasin print on a portage trail, were outspoken words to him.

But in matters of discipline he was worse than Bill Hardsock, for he was older, more set in his ways, more resentful of personal affront. Months ago Haskell had busted him from a corporal; and by humiliating him with orderly duties, he had been trying to make Larry knuckle under. Waiting for another month's pay so he could buy out of the Mounted, Larry was going about his "squaw work" with stoical face, chalking up his personal score against the day when he would be out of service and could settle with Haskell in man-to-man fashion.

Alan bade him: "Larry, drop that. Go and help Bill out. He'll tell you what's up."

As he hurried on down, Alan was feverishly wishing for more men than he had at the post. Just now he was woefully short-handed. A sergeant and three constables were over west in the mountains, registering claims and keeping order at a wilderness mining camp. A corporal and two constables, loaned to a detachment farther south, were out on an all-summer patrol in the Salt country, trying to catch a roving band of Indians who were wantonly slaughtering the wood buffalo there. That really left only himself, Bill, Larry and Pedneault; for the two fresh constables, Burgon and Whipple, would not be of much help on a patrol of this sort. Inspector Haskell would be a valuable man; he was a crack shot, cool-headed, with plenty

of nerve and a courage ground into him by three years of battle along the Somme. But he probably would not go. Patrol work was a matter for non-coms and constables, in Haskell's opinion.

Alan speculated: "But my party's big enough, strong enough—if only we can meet up with them before they reach that hiding place."

It was rare that Inspector Haskell allowed his temper to get the upper hand. He had learned self-control in the hard army school, and he considered that any exhibition of temper was a plebeian thing. But when Alan Baker came into the cabin, Haskell was thoroughly and hotly angered.

A dozen things had happened this morning to irritate him. Constable Whipple, his stool pigeon, a thin clerkish recruit whom he had brought along to Endurance, had repeated several infuriating jokes about him which the men were tossing back and forth in barracks. The nickname "Spring-heel Johnny," referring to his rapid rise to inspectorship, enraged him, because it was the truth. A few minutes ago Bill Hardsock, plainly carrying important news, had brushed past him as though he had not existed, and had taken the news straight to Alan Baker. And just now through the open door he had seen Baker order Larry Younge to drop work assigned by a superior officer and do something else.

To be so plainly ignored by his own men when any matter of importance came up, made him appear a nobody. To have Baker issuing orders and getting a patrol ready without first consulting him, seemed to him a gross violation of discipline. He had formerly been forced to let Baker have his way in managing the post; but now, shocked at realizing how very little

he himself amounted to here, and confident that his six months of experience made him capable of running the detachment himself, he had sworn he was going to come down on these men and come down *hard*.

But the secret and real source of his anger was a deep smoldering jealousy of Baker because of Elizabeth Spaulding. More clearly at every talk with her, he saw she trusted Baker, liked him, and was going to marry him. Her cool inaccessibility maddened Haskell; and her comparison between him and a ninety-a-month sergeant cut his pride to the quick. In the garden this morning a remark of hers, a thinly-veiled hint that she considered him not exactly a man of honor, had struck him like a slap in the face. The memory of it rankled; and his former easy assurance that he could take her away from Baker was completely shattered now.

Looking back across his relations with her, Haskell vividly remembered that day last fall when he first came and first met her—that encounter in the garden yonder when the goldenrods were blooming. Pretty, cool, a trifle haughty, she was just the kind of girl who suited him, and was the only person here at Endurance whom he cared to associate with. He remembered that when he first started seeking her company, he had said to himself that he was doing it only because time hung heavy in the long winter and because Baker resented his attentions to her—and was helpless to do anything about it! But now he could no longer say to himself that his motive was a mere pleasantry. His admiration had mounted, it had quickened with passion, it had become a fire in his blood—the first and only passionate affection he had ever known. His life, formerly so leisurely and purposeless, had taken on an aim, a goal. That goal was to smash her engagement and wrest her away from Baker.

For months now he had been nursing the idea that if only he could "bust" and humiliate Baker, he could swing Elizabeth away from him. But no opportunity had arisen, no pretext that Superintendent Williamson would accept; and Baker had somehow failed to walk into a couple shrewd traps laid for him. And Elizabeth had remained inaccessible, and lately sardonic. The prospect of losing her unleashed a blind demoralizing anger against the man she was going to.

As Baker hurried into the cabin, Haskell swung on him:

"Don't you know better than to come bursting into an officer's quarters without knocking and asking permission? Go out and try it again."

His words went past Alan unheeded. Alan's mind was too much a turmoil. . . . Jimmy murdered, Joyce alone there on the lonely savage Alooska, those six bandit strangers escaping with their loot. . . . There was but one thought in his mind—to get away in the big scarlet-and-gold launch with his men and overhaul those two canoes before they were lost beyond all pursuit.

Forgetting even his salute, he came across to the desk. As though checked by the look on his face, Haskell did not repeat the reprimand. Instead he listened silently while Alan reported the robbery, murder, escape.

"They're heading up the Big Alooska toward a muskeg country lying back there in the northeast," Alan explained quickly. "It's called the Thal-Azzah, the Land of Many Waters. It's ten thousand square miles of crisscross waterways—lakes, channels, slow creeks, and soup-thin bog all covered with flags and willows. Canoes don't leave tracks, and we couldn't comb through that much country in a year. They're heading

for the Thal-Azzah. That's why they staged the robbery at the Alooska mouth—so they'd have a straight shoot into that muskeg. If they reach it we might never get them. I'm going to take the launch and the five men I've got——"

Haskell stiffened. In sarcastic tones he interrupted: "*You've* got? Just a second, Baker. It would be a little better form to give your report and possibly make suggestions, and then allow me, as Officer Commanding here, to issue orders. Instead of that you come thumping in, with some wild guesses and hasty, half-cocked plans, and say, 'I'm going to take *my* men,' and 'I'm going to do this and that'!"

Alan stared at him in surprise. After all the long months of the winter past when he had initiated every patrol that went out, he was totally unprepared for this testy reprimand. He sensed some change in Haskell, some sudden tightening of authority, some stubborn decision to be the boss here at Endurance. An anger rose in him at Haskell's choosing to bandy personalities just now when those two canoes were whipping up the Alooska.

Trying to fight down his impatience, he said: "Maybe it was tactless of me. But all along I've been——"

"Yes, certainly—acting as though you were O. C. around here. You didn't appreciate tolerance when you had it. You can take note from now on you haven't got it! *I'll* issue the orders about this patrol."

Abruptly he turned away to the wall behind him where a map of the Endurance country was tacked up. A big six-foot-square mosaic, it was the inspector's own handiwork—a synthesis of government reports, explorers' sketches and unreliable Indian accounts. Though a few of the larger details were correct, in

Alan's eyes it was a clumsy and ridiculous piece of charting. It showed rivers where there were no rivers, heavy forestry where only willow muskeg existed, and big lakes where a muskrat could not wet a foot.

As he waited, swearing at this loss of precious minutes, Alan happened to see Constable Whipple over in a corner, making inventory entries at a table. He said:

"Whipple, you'd better knock off on that and get into fatigue clothes. We'll need all the men on this patrol."

Whipple did not obey him, or stir, but waited for the inspector's orders.

Alan later remembered, to his heavy cost and sorrow, how Whipple had sat there in the corner, listening, scratching away with a pen, while Bill and Larry and Pedneault were down at the wharf hurriedly making ready.

In helpless exasperation at Haskell, he thought: "Good Lord, aren't you ever going to get through studying that crazy damned map?" Back of this change in Haskell, this angry decision to run Endurance according to his own notions, Alan sensed an ugly hostility against him personally. He was quite well aware of the cause of that bad blood. He had not been blind these last months; he knew Haskell was madly in love with Elizabeth.

There were aspects to George Haskell's character which Alan could not understand. At the very first he had rather liked the man. A tall regimental officer, with stern regular features, with good breeding and superb education, he made an instantaneous good impression. In spite of his being a political appointee with no Mounted record to speak of, Alan had rather thought he would catch on here in time and become a

fair officer. Of his keen, whiplash intellect Alan was fully aware. Of his personal bravery, too, there could be no honest doubt. . . . One time last winter Haskell had coolly stepped in between two drunken Indians and taken their deer-knives away from them, and then knocked their heads together when they drew guns on him.

But something lacked in George Haskell—something that undermined all his other qualities. In a hundred little incidents Alan had seen that lack; and it killed whatever respect he once had had. Haskell was without a compelling sense of honesty; at bottom he was not a man of integrity or personal honor. Alan felt that an officer who would deliberately send him away on patrols in order to be alone here with a girl, had something abysmally wrong in his moral make-up. He suspected Haskell could be tricky and unscrupulous in other directions too.

But just how dishonest Haskell could be in a showdown fight—Alan had that discovery still ahead of him.

Presently, turning around from his map, Haskell said:

"I see that the Big Alooska, about a hundred miles northeast from its mouth, divides into two branches."

To hurry this talk up, Alan stepped around behind the desk, and pointed at the map as he spoke.

"Yes, that forks is called the Big Leavings. But it's farther east than your map shows; it's nearer two hundred miles. Here's MacMillan's trading post. Here's the Forks. The right branch leads southeast through this . . . it should be marked timber country. The left branch goes northeast into the big muskeg. About here is where the Thal-Azzah should be marked. They're heading up this left branch for the Thal-Azzah——"

Interrupting, Haskell demanded, "How do you know they're doing that?"

"I don't *know,* but it's a sensible guess. They seem to be pretty well acquainted with this country. The Thal-Azzah is a hiding-place made to order, and they're surely breaking for it."

"Hmmph! Maybe." Haskell lit a cigarette, and went on studying the map.

An impulse swept through Alan. . . . He turned, he glanced at the open door, as though by simply walking out he could end this intolerable, maddening delay. But he checked himself, fought down his trembling impatience, waited.

Haskell at last made up his mind. Turning again, he ordered:

"You'll take the launch and the five men, Baker, and go up the Alooska. If you don't overtake those bandits before reaching the Forks, leave the launch there, split your party, three men each, and follow up both those branches——"

Alan objected, "But three men against six, the six who pulled a trick like that robbery—three mightn't be able to handle them."

"Do you want a battalion?"

"When I go up against those six, I want all the men I can have. They've got murder charges over them, they've got a fortune in their possession; they're going to put up a finish fight."

"Three men can handle them. Three men with the law behind them——"

"A city cop may be a squad by himself," Alan interrupted, "but in the bush a man is a man. A legal bullet don't kill any deader than an outlaw bullet. Men who'll hold up a big steamer in broad daylight and who face the gallows if caught, aren't going to be paralyzed by

the sight of a uniform. I believe my party shouldn't split. We ought to stick together and whip up that left branch. That's the fork they'll take."

"You're merely guessing," Haskell said coldly. "You don't know which branch they'll take."

Alan tried a last despairing argument. "Look here. Suppose my guess *is* wrong. Suppose we do whip up the north branch, and discover they've followed the south. We could easily drop back to the Forks and trail them. It's timber country, and Larry would be sure to find tracks on the portages. There are Indians camped at fish weirs, all along that branch, to give them away."

"Your reasons are good but not conclusive," Haskell insisted. "If those men are as shrewd as you make out, they *can* escape through timber country. But by my plan you'd be sure to overtake them on one branch or other."

"Yes, and have half my men shot up. I'm responsible for them. *I* know what that kind of responsibility means. You're hog-tying me with orders I know are dead wrong."

Haskell tapped the table with his pen-knife. "I've given you my reasons, Baker, and listened to yours. If you refuse to obey orders, you'll stay here at the post, and I'll put Corporal Hardsock in charge of this detail. Take your choice."

Alan was not the fool to believe Haskell was bluffing. The man would keep him here and demote him for refusing to obey a command. He had been waiting months for just such a chance. It was a question of holding out against those ignorant instructions or getting away with the men and making the best of it. Perhaps, after all, he would catch up with the bandits before they reached the Forks.

Beaten, weary of arguing, he gave in. "All right, inspector. I'll follow both branches."

To cut off further delay he whirled abruptly on his heel and strode out.

At his cabin he buckled on his belt-gun, caught up his rifle; then hurried down to the landing.

Burgoon came down from barracks. A little later Whipple came and timidly took his seat in the launch. While Alan and Bill and Younge were storing aboard guns, tent, grub and blankets, Factor Drummond tramped down to the wharf to toss a carton of cigarettes and a deep-felt "Good luck, fellows!" to the patrol. On the terrace above, with a book in her lap, Elizabeth Spaulding watched casually.

Then Frank Pedneault, demoniac driver of the powerful launch, slid into the wheel seat and slipped in the gears; and swinging the big scarlet-and-gold craft into the current, he headed north, down the Mackenzie.

They were at last away on the pursuit.

But all Alan's ardor had gone. All his leaping urge to be on the chase had gone. Premonition whispered, and its whisper chilled him. As he glanced around at his men, at the comrades he was leading and was responsible for, he was thinking that tomorrow this time two or three of them might be dead—somewhere up the spruce-buried Alooska.

CHAPTER IV: A CALL TO VENGEANCE

DURING that dash down the Mackenzie, Alan kept picturing that lonely post up the Alooska; and he tried to imagine what was happening there. As Bill had said, the bandits would have to pass the place. In all likelihood Joyce would be alone.

His thoughts were not enviable. . . . "They used Margaret Fournier as a means of making their getaway from the steamer. It worked so well then that they might try the idea again. They might try to capture Joyce and use her as a sort of hostage to protect themselves."

But somehow he did not greatly fear they would do this. They probably would not stop at all, but would whip on past, on for the oblivion of the Thal-Azzah. And if they did stop, they'd not be able to commandeer Joyce so easily as they took Margaret Fournier. Alan thought: "*I* wouldn't want the job of trying to make a hostage of Joyce. She's had to handle too many insolent 'breeds and sub-chiefs, there at that post." He remembered the gun she always carried, his own gift to her on her twentieth birthday. A black automatic, a tiny thing like a toy, it nevertheless was blunt and effective as a terrier bulldog. That big red-bearded bandit who had threatened to put a bullet "squar' atween" the eyes of Margaret Fournier, would likely get one between his own if he tried any brutality with Joyce MacMillan.

To Alan it seemed pretty clear that Bill in his haste and excitement had made a mistake about those men

being strangers to everyone aboard the steamer. It didn't look possible. There simply were no strangers in this country. When any newcomer started down north over the Three Rivers route, the Police quietly made it their business to find out who he was. In summer a few hardy trippers went from Edmonton, via the Athabasca, Slave and Mackenzie, to Hershell Island in the Arctic; but the season was too early for them. The Norman oil rushes had ebbed several years ago, and their riffraff and shady elements had completely vanished. Only the permanent population remained—trappers, traders, a few prospectors and people on government or mission service. The country itself might be huge as a dozen states, but all the routes into it were guarded, and in respect to its people it could have been a crossroads hamlet, where Jean Baptiste knew precisely how many muskrat pelts Sandy MacDonald had taken in last year. Alan himself was personally acquainted with every one of the few dozen whites from Chipewyan to Arctic Aklavik.

It occurred to him that possibly these men had come down north by plane. It was possible. Alert prospectors and big mining companies were using aircraft all through Manitoba, Saskatchewan and the southern part of the Northwest Territories; and even traders were using planes in place of dog team and canoe. But somehow he had a conviction that these bandits had not done so. Airplane movements in the western provinces were too strictly supervised, and licenses were issued only to people of repute. All along the northern edge of the city country the Police posts were keeping an especially sharp watch on aircraft, guarding against whisky smuggling to the Indians and against big-game hunters flying in to kill wild swans or slaughter caribou out of season. Moreover, from what Bill said,

these six men, uncouth and shaggy-barked, were not of the swift clever type of bandits who would use planes.

There was an added argument, the weightiest of all, against these men being strangers. They knew this country, knew it intimately. It took years to learn the ins and outs of so huge a region. But *they* knew.

Alan concluded: "They aren't strangers, of course. Bill just made a mistake."

Half-hidden between two blanket packs Constable Whipple sat fingering his rifle, peering ahead anxiously, as though at any moment he expected to meet the outlaw canoes here on the Mackenzie. Alan watched him with something of scorn in his eyes. He thoroughly despised the constable, not so much for his timidity as for his sycophancy. At Endurance Whipple was constantly spying upon the other men, listening with long ears, reporting everything that happened and a lot that did not.

Burgoon, sitting beside Whipple, was entirely unconcerned and apathetic. It made no discoverable difference to him whether he was policing up barracks, or going along to capture six outlaw riflemen, or lying on the grassy terrace swiping his hat at bumblebees. Alan often had wondered how Burgoon had ever got into the "Awkward Squad," and how, once in, he had ever got out of it. He was an inoffensive Neanderthaler, slow, dull, but honest and obedient.

Leaning forward in the wheel seat, Frank Pedneault was watching ahead, keeping a sharp lookout for ice and floating trees. A reckless soul with a thirst for speed, with all the proverbial luck of a drunken man in avoiding disasters, with quick coördination of brain and hand, Pedneault had a genius for running the swift Police launch. And he was happy now, in his element now; and he had sufficient excuse for his de-

moniac driving. With hat pulled low over his eyebrows and a dead pipe clenched in his teeth, he was laying a scarlet-and-gold streak down the Mackenzie, tearing through waters perilous with heavy ice-pans and half-submerged trees and miniature icebergs from tributary overfalls.

On either side, the spruce-clad shores a mile away were a shimmering dark-green under the warm sun, with gleams and patches of silver from stances of canoe birch. Trout creeks came stair-stepping down from the flanking hills to join the stream of streams, *La Gran' Rivière en Bas*. Little black bears were ambling along the far shores, followed by scavenger foxes. Belly-deep in shoal water an occasional deer or broad-faced moose or a caribou that had strayed from the general migration, stood watching the man-thing scud swiftly past, far out in the middle, like some gargantuan water-bug.

Forty miles below Endurance, sweeping near to shore around a great bend, Alan looked ahead and sighted the *Midnight Sun* out in midstream, plowing steadily up south. At his gesture Pedneault swerved the launch and snubbed its headlong speed, and Bill began unlashing one of the canoes. As the two craft drew nearer, Alan rose up and signaled that he wished to come aboard the steamer. The boat stopped, a ladder was let down. Paddling across in the birchbark, he and Bill hurried up on deck.

Margaret Fournier was safely back on board. Several of the men, hastily patching one of the smashed canoes, had followed up the Alooska a mile and found her on a willow island where the bandits had set her off.

When Alan came on deck, almost his first sight was of Jimmy Montgomery's little girl, perched upon a

pile of cargo, showered with care and attention from everyone. As he glanced at the tiny golden-haired tot, Alan thought of her mother dying less than a year ago, of her young father cut down today by an outlaw's bullet; and he had a swift vision of the bleak orphanage, the friendless and homeless life, which lay ahead for her, now that Jimmy was dead. He remembered one savage November day last fall at Endurance when he buttoned her snugly inside his greatcoat and took her up to his cabin, and remembered how broad was Jimmy's smile at his former partner playing with his child.

He was not deceived by the attention she was getting now. Everyone was all sympathy for her today, but that would cool mighty quick; and then she'd be thrown into some orphanage, maybe along with half-breed and Indian children. Alan thought, "She's Jimmy's child; Jimmy was my partner; it's up to me to do something about her."

With nothing more definite than this in mind, he directed Ashmun, the white-haired skipper: "You put her off at Endurance tonight. Give her to Elizabeth. Say I'll be back in two or three days."

Following the old captain below, he stepped softly, hat in hand, into the one well-fitted cabin of the steamer. The realization of death, which Bill's report had made him feel only to a degree, crept over him with a chill shudder as he entered the dim room; and it swept over him like an engulfing wave as he stepped up, haltingly, to the berth there and bent over the still form of a comrade. The slight coldness which had arisen between him and Jimmy when the latter bought out, was forgotten now, and he remembered Jimmy only as a trail partner and a quiet gentle soul and the most utterly fearless man he had ever known.

Stone-silent he stood beside the berth looking down for the space of half a minute, sick at heart, his eyes blurring. Why had it been Jimmy who was cut down? —a young man, a young father, the best and bravest of them all. This fiat of an inscrutable fate seemed an awful injustice, a monstrous cruelty; and a bitter rebellion welled up in Alan, hardened though he was to grim reality. It seemed to him there was no justice in the world except man's own attempt at it.

Then like a small whisper in his loss, a thought came, edged with pride in Jimmy and the manner of his death:

"*You were the only one who drew a gun.* You knew they'd kill you . . . a belt-gun against six rifles; but you stood up and shot. You were always that kind; and so was Curt. Now you're both gone; now I'm alone, of us three——"

The desolation was unbearable. Bill following, he turned and went out of the cabin.

In the companionway Father Claverly, waiting for him, asked gently:

"You want Jimmy to be—his lobstick to be there at Fort Endurance, Alan?" And when Alan nodded, he proffered: "Then I'll see to the arrangements. What faith was Jimmy?"

Alan hesitated. Jimmy had been of no faith, except perhaps the faith of shooting square with people, of personal bravery, of clean self-respecting manhood. Alan felt that the question of creed was of no import, but he could not say this to Father Claverly, whom he deeply respected.

He said, "I think, Anglican."

"In that case . . . Brother Holland of the Aklavik Mission is on the steamer; I'll ask him to stop off at Endurance." He shook Alan's hand, and said: "God

go with you and Bill and the others on what's ahead. If we've little crime like this in our country here, it's because we have men like you, and like Jimmy was, to punish it."

Still feeling the chill of that dim room below and seeing that silent form in the berth there, Alan went out into the sunshine of the deck. A grim mood had come over him, a mood shot through with personal and deadly intention. He was no longer merely the stern and efficient representative of the law. Vengeance, a burning and righteous vengeance, had entered his heart. Those moments in the cabin below had been like a call to him, the call of a partner dead to a partner living.

With a dozen men crowding around to listen, he questioned Skipper Ashmun briefly.

"Bill said these men were strangers. That can't be. Didn't you recognize them at all? Haven't you got some idea who they were?"

"Alan, I positively never seen a man of 'em till I looked up and there they stood p'inting their weepons at us. And I see just about everybody that goes up and down the river."

The other men, old-timers from a dozen different points along the Great Waterways, nodded to what Ashmun said.

Alan questioned, "They use any disguise—masks, handkerchiefs, anything like that?"

"No sir, Alan, they didn't. They wasn't shaved real fresh, but that wouldn't keep me from knowing 'em if——"

"They just don't belong here," a trader cut in. "And they never showed up in this country till they pulled this trick. We been talking it over; nobody ever seen 'em, and that's that! You wouldn't forgit 'em; they're

a queer outlandish bunch. Short of 'em dropping out of the sky, damned if I can figger 'em!"

"And they knowed the lay of the land like a book," another man spoke up. "That's the queerest part of 't."

Alan was fairly staggered. Bill *had* reported accurately. The men *were* strangers. Impossible or not, they were utterly unknown here.

How under heaven could six men enter this country unknown, unseen? Then, granting they had, granting them strangers, how did they come to know the lay of the land so perfectly?—where to strike, when to strike, how to escape by a straight shoot to their one superlative refuge, the Thal-Azzah.

In all his years of Police service he had never met quite so dark a circumstance as this.

He thought of the possibility that someone acquainted with this country was behind the scenes, directing everything. But that did not explain who these six strangers were or how they had got into this far northern wilderness without leaving one track or clue.

Oblivious to the score of people who wanted to speak to him and give him their version of the robbery, Alan hurried across to the ladder. The sun was inching down the western sky; the day was passing; those two outlaw canoes had a lead of many long hours.

As he and Bill went down the ladder, the rail was lined with people wishing them a quick capture, wishing the criminals a swift and speedy justice. Alan did not hear, did not care. But as he stepped into the canoe and with a shove sent it skirling toward the launch, he did hear one voice from some man on the steamer; and it rang in his ears like a croak of evil prophecy:

"Going after men like them, Alan Baker, you'd better take your luck along!"

CHAPTER V: A DAUGHTER OF THE STRONG-WOODS

At the MacMillan Trading Post Joyce had lighted candles in the kitchen and trading hall. It was nearly eleven at night, and the twilight creeping out of the dark spruce forest had laid a purple mantle over the tiny clearing.

Though she hardly knew just when her father would return from his fur-buying trip, Joyce had kindled a comfortable fire in his bedroom and had prepared a supper of scones and breaded mushrooms and willow ptarmigan which she herself had shot that morning. Now she was setting the table, resolutely keeping busy as her best defense against lonely hours and brooding thoughts.

As she stood tiptoe at a pantry shelf, away from the crackle and sough of the cook stove, she heard some peculiar noise somewhere out in the night. She went over to the window and there heard it more distinctly —a faint drone that rose and fell with the ground winds drifting out of the spruces. Frowning a little as she always did when puzzled, she stood listening intently, with the candle glow tangled in her wavy black hair, with her pretty face whiter because of the darkness beyond.

The puzzling sound grew louder, plainer. Then suddenly Joyce knew. The Police launch! Coming up the Big Alooska. Coming slowly because of the treacherous channel, but driving on through the twilight in spite of the danger.

That launch went out only on matters of importance. And this patrol must be *very* important, to bring the men up a perilous river at this hour.

Throwing a cape about her shoulders, she ran through the trading hall, musky from fresh spring peltry passed over its counters; out into the sharp pine-scented air; down to the canoe landing at the river bank. Whatever their mission was, the men must surely stop here, for the Alooska on above was altogether impossible to travel while the deep dark lasted. To talk with Bill and Ped and Mr. Younge would be a welcome break in the lonely monotony of these last several days.

As she stood on the mud-filmed planking, with the whispering breeze molding cape and dress closely about her vigorous young body, Joyce tried to pray that Alan was not leading this patrol. Her girlish pride was crying out that she did not want to see Alan Baker. Her rational mind—and Joyce could be very rational and pitiless with herself—was warning that it would be better for her if she never saw him again at all. But no pride or rationalizing could beat down the secret throbbing expectancy of meeting Alan, of hearing his voice, in a few minutes more.

It had been months now—a desolate stretch reaching back across budding May and thawing April and blizzardy March to white silent February—since he had come here to visit her. In those four months Joyce had forced herself to repeat, as a lesson in dauntlessly facing bitter truth: "He doesn't *want* to come any more. He's got Elizabeth now. She's there at Endurance—with him."

Through the whole long winter Joyce had been slowly realizing that her return to this northern Waterways country had been a terrible mistake. Once she

had been away, free of it all. With the true instinct of colonial Britons for their children, her dad and mother had sent her out to school. That was in better times for Dave MacMillan, before those big fur companies began to grind him between their millstones of competition. He had sent her to a good school, a solid old English institution in Ontario. When she finished, she quickly hunted up a job for herself, a place with a government bureau, where her knowledge of Indian languages and customs made her uniquely valuable in preparing pamphlets for the far northern agencies. Independent, earning a good salary, with friends and sports and work she liked, she had given up all of it and returned to this isolated fur post on a sub-Arctic river.

Looking back now on that fateful decision, Joyce could clearly see her motives in returning. For one thing—a minor reason to her then—this country was her home, and it always would be her spiritual home, regardless of where she lived. She had been born and reared here, and only when she was away from it had she realized how much a part of her it was. After several years in cities, she had been homesick for the beauty and freedom and wild elusive spirit of this great wilderness.

Then her mother had died, and her father, alone here, crushed by the relentless competition of big companies out to "get" him, had morally gone to pieces. Alan in his letters had written her the sorry facts. Her duty, clear as a call, had spoken to her, "If you return, you may be able to stop that; you may help Dad back to where he was." And she had come.

She knew that other folk were surprised at her loyalty, and thought her foolish, and were shrugging

shoulders at the hopelessness of a mere girl trying to lift Dave MacMillan above the whisky and Indian-woman life he had sunk into. But Joyce did not consider it foolish, and she could see no great loyalty about it. Whatever his demoralization now, her father had been the best of fathers to her. She could look back across the years and see him, on bitter winter mornings, coming with frosty breath into her room, kneeling by the stove, whittling shavings, building a fire, so that his little girl could dress in the warm. She remembered that when he was expected back from some trip, she used to stand at the window for hours, her face pressed against the pane, waiting for his bearded, overpowering hug. The earliest recollection of her life was of her father pulling her on a toboggan across all those white leagues to Fort Endurance so that she could know the joy of Christmas the same as other children. On money pinched from trading and from his own traplines along the Alooska, he had sent her outside to school and made her independent. When he himself was floundering and sinking, he had held her above the water. If he was broken and gray and gnarled now, it was partly for her. He had sheltered and cherished *her,* and she would do no less for *him,* not out of duty but from love.

Looking at him not as a father but as a man, she could realize now, in her own womanhood, that he had been the best of husbands to her mother. She remembered that as a child she had sensed a quiet love between her father and mother which shut even herself out and made her jealous of them. She felt it was her mother's death, the inconsolable tragedy of God withdrawing His hand, which really had broken sturdy Dave MacMillan.

And Joyce was beginning to realize, as the slow months passed, that her patient battle was anything but futile. Slowly, so slowly that only she herself could see it, she was winning her struggle, she was lifting her father out of his bewildered demoralization. Shame was at work; he never was drunk any more in her presence; his trips into the bush were less and less frequent; he was talking now with her about plans to abandon this hopeless post and go with the H. B., who wanted him as a factor. He was looking up, with renewed courage. If only she were given another season or two, she could salvage his life.

Down in Ontario, debating what path to take, Joyce had thought of asking her dad to come and live with her. From a money standpoint, considering her good salary, that was the sensible thing to do. But she had chosen to return here. At that time she had not fully realized the secret and irresistible reason of her return. If anyone had told her that reason, she would have denied it hotly. But now, face to face with a personal tragedy which forced her to disillusioned thinking, she looked into her heart and saw there the real motive. It was Alan Baker who had drawn her. Through her girlhood she had been good friends to Alan, in that casual comradely way which is usually a bar to any deeper emotion. But with the coming of young womanhood she had changed toward him. Something new had entered her heart toward him. By degrees unknown, unperceived by her, that girlhood friendship had deepened into love.

She had come back to be near Alan Baker. She had come back in the passionate hope that he and she would marry.

There had been an unspoken understanding between herself and Alan that when the road ahead was a little

clearer for both of them, they would be married. And then Elizabeth had come. . . . From the very first Joyce had noticed Elizabeth's interest in him as a "good catch." After Curt's death she had been angered at the shameless way Elizabeth made herself dependent on Alan, a parasite on his strength. Thinking of them together there at Endurance, she had known jealousy and a certain haunting fear.

But for all that, his engagement to Elizabeth had been a dazing, unexpected blow. When Bill, coming past on patrol, awkwardly blurted out the news of it, she had not believed. It took days of racked wandering in the woods, weeks of helpless anguished tossing, before the spirited strength and courage that were so great a part of Joyce, fought up out, and she steadied herself and began to believe.

But even now she did not fully accept. That engagement seemed strange to her. Though she knew nothing of Alan's secret motives, she did feel there was something behind it which Alan had told no one. It seemed to her, from what she had observed, that Alan had no passionate affection for Elizabeth. True enough, he idealized her, he was stubbornly loyal to her; but he had never spoken of her with the accent of passion. Perhaps his heart was not wholly in that engagement, whatever reason had driven him to it. Perhaps, after all, he would rather have gone on with the old intimacy.

Month after month Joyce had waited for word of his marriage to Elizabeth. The word had not come. She wondered. . . . What was causing this long delay? She could only guess at possibilities, but during the lengthening months the belief had been born in her that something had arisen as a barrier to the marriage and that the engagement might be broken off.

When she thought of all these things and remembered how intimate and comradely she and Alan had been to one another, Joyce could not kill her lingering hope. As she stood there on the planking now, awaiting the patrol, with her heart thumping at the prospect of seeing Alan and talking to him once more, she knew that tonight she would come a little closer to discovering whether her wild guesses were truth or only wishful hoping.

Across the river from her, ptarmigan were bleating and crowing in a jackpine drogue. On beyond, a mile away, she heard the honking, flackering calls of ducks and geese and wavies in a large marsh where often she had gone to gather eggs. *"Le poulailler du bon Dieu"*—God's own poultry-yard—she had once heard an old French *méti* speak of it. From a jumble of low rocky hills to the north came the cry of a wolf; and Joyce suspected it was the female of the marauding pair which she had tracked down in a skiff of May snow, finally shooting the male. That wolf call seemed to voice the savagery of the lonely northland; the vesper song of white-crowned sparrows from nearby thickets whispered its hidden beauties; in the delicious living air were its sparkling vitality and zest of life. And in all of these, blending them into one tone, brooding over the twilight solitude of the river, was that mystic and elusive spirit of the wilderness which had called to her in cities far south and lured her back, and had been an abiding friend when human relationships betrayed her.

Down the river a great yellow eye blinked through the trees. Swinging around a bend, it played up across the water. In a few moments more it picked her out, there on the landing; and Joyce stood bathed in the blinding shaft of the launch's searchlight. The craft

came on and on until by shielding her eyes she distinguished its outline and caught the glitter of rifle steel.

The engine ceased. Skillfully, gently, the launch nosed in toward the landing. A figure stepped past the searchlight and stood holding the painter on the half-deck of the bow; and Joyce knew then, her eyes seeing only him, that Alan Baker led this patrol.

She did not stir, but watched him jump out upon the planking, yank the two-ton launch alongside, and throw a hitch over a wharf post. She heard his voice: "Ped, you stay and watch the boat. The rest of you pile out and stretch your legs while you've got a chance." Then he turned and came to her in the semi-darkness, his hand outstretched.

Joyce tried to welcome him calmly, as though his four-months absence had been a casual thing which she had not even noticed. But in that moment she was thankful for the deep twilight, and she stepped back a little, where the shadows of a low-sweeping balsam veiled her face. About the only rag of pride left to her was the fact that Alan Baker did not know or remotely guess her heart toward him.

With his first question, after their warm hand-clasp, he asked her:

"Has anybody passed here lately, Joyce?"

"Not that I've seen. Nobody in the last four days." She was debating whether to call him 'Mr. Baker' or 'Sergeant' or the old, intimate 'Alan.'

"But surely they did! Were you here all day?"

Joyce noticed then a tautness in his voice, and she saw he had brought five men with him on this patrol. It was no routine work, no ordinary pursuit, this time.

She answered: "I was out hunting this morning, and

I slept a couple hours this afternoon. They might have passed then. But they couldn't have gone by while I was here and awake."

"What time were you asleep this afternoon, Joyce?"

"I can't exactly . . . our clock isn't . . . Probably from about four till six."

Alan half-turned to Hardsock. "Bill, you heard what Joyce said? They couldn't have reached here this morning, so they must have passed here after four. We're nearer up with them than I figured. We'd better stay here till the deep dark breaks; we've cracked one rock on the nose already. And at night this way we can't sight those men on ahead. They'd hear the launch coming and dodge aside into some creek."

He turned again to her. "If it won't be imposing, Joyce, will you give us a bite to eat and some coffee?"

Imposing—an hour of *his* company, setting a meal for him, learning the truth of his relations with Elizabeth! But she merely nodded and invited the patrol up to the trading store.

Ahead of the men the two of them went up the path together, Alan shielding her from the brush overgrowing the trail; and as they went he told her briefly of the robbery, the murder, the escape up the Alooska.

The news fairly stunned Joyce, as it had him when Bill reported. And with her there was an added reason, a reason that struck her with sudden fear. Before Alan finished, she was grasping his arm in trembling fright.

"My dad! He's on northeast, up river—up there somewhere! He's bringing down some furs. Alan! what if he runs into those men?"

"Good Lord!" Alan breathed to himself. "If they meet Dave . . . They're not the kind to let anybody go past alive and report their whereabouts!"

For Joyce's sake he tried to lie convincingly. "They

may not meet him at all, Joyce. And if they do, why, they'd hardly shoot a man down wantonly. If for no other reason, it doesn't pay. They've got charges enough against them as it is. And they won't rob him; their canoes are riding heavy now."

He saw that his lie succeeded with Joyce, for she began questioning him about the details of the robbery, wondering who these six strangers could be, and giving him some valuable information about the water stages on up the Alooska.

As they stepped into the trading hall and Joyce was no longer merely a girlish figure beside him in semi-darkness, Alan glanced searchingly at her, keenly and shamefully aware that he had not visited her since mid-winter and had thrown the whole burden of her father's battle upon her. The long months of absence seemed to have invested her with an element of strangeness for him, so that his glance was not casual. How very vital Joyce was! In their old days, seeing her often, he had not especially noticed that quality of hers, but now it struck him forcibly. Her voice was alive; her dark eyes had a sparkle like a fire within them; there was vigor and lightness in her step. Firm-muscled from paddling canoes and swimming and hunting in the bush, her body was lissome and graceful as a young poplar. The proud poise of her head made him think how apt was her name among the Yellowknives—Dahr-Neseepi—Young-Deer-running-down-the-Wind.

They went on back to the kitchen, and Joyce set about getting a meal for six tired hungry men. With Alan awkwardly trying to be of help and apologizing for all this trouble, she hastily fried caribou steaks, made two large pans of biscuit, and a small kettle of coffee.

As he set extra plates and cups on the table, Alan asked himself:

"Isn't she wondering why I haven't been here for so long? I'd think she would wonder at least why I stopped helping her about Dave. But she hasn't mentioned it; she must not have missed my help much. It was pretty shabby of me to stop like that, even if . . ." He recalled how Elizabeth, jealous of the comradeship between him and Joyce, had asked him to let Bill attend to any patrol work up the Big Alooska. Elizabeth's references to "that MacMillan girl" had antagonized him at times. They seemed positively cruel, considering the hard lines Joyce was in. He wanted to tell Joyce just why he had stayed away. But that would be throwing the blame on Elizabeth. And it might sound as though Elizabeth was already saying whom he could and could not associate with.

A question from Joyce broke into his thoughts.

"When are you and Elizabeth going to be married, Alan?"

He glanced at her quickly. She had turned her face away from him; she was putting a plate of food in the oven to keep warm for Pedneault. Her question, or rather the way she asked it, hurt Alan, for some reason he could not exactly word. Her voice was so very casual, as though she had not even a friend's interest in his marriage. Could it be possible that he and Joyce, once so intimate and so near to each other that they had spoken of children and a life together, were now casually discussing his marriage to another girl?

He said, "We haven't—we're—we don't exactly know yet."

There was a pause. A swift color had flown into Joyce's cheeks; a little feverishly she was repeating

to herself those surprising words: "He doesn't know yet, he doesn't know yet! Does that mean—mean he's doubtful if it will ever be?"

"But it'll be this summer, I suppose?" she questioned, poking at the stove and still not looking at Alan.

"I don't know. Yes, I guess so, Joyce." Then he explained reluctantly, "Elizabeth wants me to get out of the Mounted."

Joyce gasped. Out of the Mounted—she could not imagine such a thing. The work was a part of Alan. What would he do without it? And what would Fort Endurance do without *him?* What would Bill do without Alan—and Mr. Younge and Ped and these other men? And she herself, if he left? . . . Something cold and anguishing gripped her at the thought of him leaving this country. At least he had been near her during the lonely months past.

She said: "But Alan! What would you turn to? The Mounted has been your work——"

"Well, I've got the offer of a job down in Victoria. It's pretty good, as far as money goes. And Elizabeth would like it there. I haven't exactly decided. It's a big step to take."

Those few reluctant sentences were a revelation to Joyce, like a white light beating upon something which had been dark to her. Alan didn't want to go! His voice was reluctant, his words stumbled, when he mentioned even the possibility. Elizabeth was trying to force him. She wanted to live in a city; she wanted the things which that salary would bring her; she was using Alan to get what she wanted. But she and Alan were not of one mind! There was the reason why this marriage had been delayed and why Alan was so vague about when it would be! If he really loved her, deeply

and passionately, would he be so reluctant, would he allow anything on earth to come between them?

Joyce dared not ask him anything further then; he might add a word that would destroy this new-born hope. But a hundred thoughts were running wild through her. . . . "Suppose he doesn't yield to Elizabeth! Suppose he won't go! Then she won't marry him! She'll throw him over for Haskell; that's what she'll surely do. Bill says she and Haskell are together half the time Alan's away from Endurance. Isn't that the reason?—she's not sure of Alan yielding; and if she can't have her way with him, then she'd like to be an inspector's wife!"

With swift unerring insight Joyce saw the all-crucial question: Would Alan get out of the Mounted? She was still uncertain what he truly felt for Elizabeth, but from his own lips she had learned one thing which an hour ago she had scarcely dared hope could be true. The marriage was not sure; it might *never* be!

In her abjectness she whispered to herself: "I don't care if he does like her. I don't, I *don't* care! If she throws him over, then we'll be friends again, then he'll come here to me again; and then—after that. . . ."

CHAPTER VI: FALLEN UPON "LES MISÈRES"

DURING the meal, as Joyce sat at the head of the table pouring coffee and watching a pan of biscuit in the stove, Alan kept studying her, wondering how any girl could stand the isolation and poverty and lonely battle she was enduring. The two candles were on a low shelf behind her, and her winsome features were shadowed; but he knew she was tired and had gone through a lot of suffering in the winter past.

His absence sharpened his eyes to another thing here. As he glanced around the kitchen and through the door into her bedroom, it hurt him to see how dingy Joyce's home was. She had valiantly polished and mended, but the place was as bleak as any trapper's shack. There wasn't a dish on the table that wasn't cracked; the cook stove seemed about to fall to pieces; the utensils were old and worn out. Her room was bare of carpet, with only a small deer-rug beside her bed. Remembering the chic blue velveteen suit she had worn when she came north two years ago, it tugged at him to realize she had bought no clothes for herself since then.

Two whole years here, two years out of her young womanhood, the choice time of her life, sacrificed at this isolated trading post, giving up everything that a girl holds dear! Alan thought of the *méti* expression, "Fallen upon *les misères;*" and without suspecting the greatest tragedy of it all to Joyce, he felt that she indeed had fallen upon evil days. She was too fine a girl

to be leading a life like this. She ought to get out of it. There was a limit to her bravery and spirited strength.

He reflected, "Maybe in the long run it wouldn't be so much a tragedy if Dave *does* meet those canoes up river and doesn't come back home."

As the men were pushing back their chairs and reaching for pipes, he felt someone prodding him with a boot under the table. Looking up, he saw Larry elevate an eyebrow at him.

"Wants to talk with me alone," Alan surmised; and he gave Larry a slight nod. To the other men he said rather sharply: "You men, put away your pipes and police up these dishes. Don't leave a stack like this for Joyce. Bill, you see to that."

Casually going outside a few moments later, he glanced around and saw Larry waiting for him a dozen yards away, over near the storage shed. Sauntering across, he asked quietly:

"What's up now, Larry?"

Larry flipped his cigarette aside. "Say, Alan, did it seem sorta queer to you about these men we're after being absolute strangers around here and yet knowing all about the country?"

"Why yes, it's been a puzzle."

"Did it ever occur to you that maybe someone who's onto the ropes around here might be behind the scenes directing things, Alan?"

"It's a possibility, but I couldn't think of anybody to fit that bill."

"Well, neither could I, but——" He broke off, and jerking a thumb at the storage shed, he bade: "Come in here with me, Alan. I want to show you something."

As he lifted the heavy bar, he added apologetically: "I guess it's my nature to pry around just noticing what's what. I've stumbled onto several things that

way, but I never got a staggering eye-full like this before."

Producing a pocket flash, he played its yellow shaft upon a pack of furs on a low shelf.

"Alan, you see that wolf-skin they're wrapped in? That's what caught my eye. It's a Yukon animal, probably from the Kayukuk headwaters in the Endicott Mountains. The Mackenzie and Barren Ground wolves around here, they aren't so dark and they haven't got so broad a tawny stripe down their backbone. It made me curious, so I pried into the pack and saw these dark otter. They come from the Yukon too. I thought to myself, 'There's no wolf or otter like them in Dave MacMillan's trading territory.' "

"But Dave trades some with the Loucheux, Larry; and they might have got the pelts from the Yukon-iho-Tannah."

"But say, Alan, look—(hold the flash a minute)—look here." Larry pulled out several of the rich, dark-gleaming otter pelts and rolled back the fur at the broad end. "Take a good look at them blue stamp marks."

Alan bent closer and he suddenly gasped.

"Good Lord! They're L. & H. furs! What're they doing *here,* Larry—in Dave MacMillan's possession?"

"Stolen! What else? What's more to us, Alan, I checked on them serial numbers, and this bunch is one of the packs stolen from the *Midnight Sun!"* He added slowly: "Maybe we don't know yet who them six strangers are, but now we surer'n hell know who's directing 'em!"

Hurriedly they searched for other stolen peltry, but found none.

In low tones, there in the darkness, they talked the situation over.

There was little that could be said.

Through the door Alan's eyes were upon the trading store, upon Joyce's room. She had gone in there; he could see her moving between the candle and the window.

Larry finally asked: "You're going to arrest him, Alan? An accomplice that way, even if he didn't have a hand in the actual killing, they'll give him the limit. It'll be hell on Joyce."

Alan stirred. His voice was torn with pain. "I don't know what I'll . . . But I'll have to do something about it."

After a little silence he directed: "Larry, you go down and relieve Ped. Don't tell these other men anything about this yet."

When Larry had gone, Alan left the musty-smelling shed, barred it again, and walked up along the side of the trading hall to Joyce's window. She had come into her room to set her clock by Bill's watch and to mark the day of month on her calendar. Her act struck Alan as an epitome of the isolation of this trading post where she was cut off from all the rest of humanity. He knew that the day of the month and hour of the day could mean little to her, for she lived by the dawn and twilight. It must be she wanted to feel she was not utterly apart from the world of men and women.

As he came up, purposively cracking a stick, he had a glimpse of her whole room. Its furniture was a dresser, a chair originally straight but with a pair of rockers fitted to it, a sheet-iron stove with woodbox against the wall, and a bed which he knew had been a condemned barracks cot. But Joyce had somehow lifted the bleak room almost to cheeriness. There were

birchrind creels of great-spurred violets and Arctic primulas and adder's-tongue on the dresser, some sprigs of bright-red berries above it, a wolf-rug across the foot of the bed, and on the dresser a picture of himself, of her former employer down in Ottawa, of her dad and mother. Alan thought that the school pennants, the magazine covers and illustrations tacked on the bare log walls, had surely been put there by Joyce to remind her of happier times and to keep her courage up.

She had heard him and turned toward the window and recognized him in the weak light.

He said: "Joyce, I've got to talk with you. Maybe you'd better come out here where we'll be alone."

She must have noticed his agitation, for she consented quickly, with wonder in her eyes, "Why yes, I'll come." Forgetting to wind the clock after setting it, she stepped to the window.

As Alan helped her down, trying to say lightly, "It's unlucky, Joyce, to come through a window that way," he felt the hard bulge of that little bulldog automatic pressed against him. At least his gift was still protection to her.

When she stood beside him, looking up, silently asking what he wanted to speak with her about, Alan found himself without words to begin. Joyce had utterly no knowledge of her father's guilt. Remembering her fears for her dad when he told her of the bandits whipping on up river, he knew there was nothing "put on" about that fright. She did not faintly suspect that her father was in any way connected with the robbery or those bandit strangers. She had stood some hard blows; but this one—her dad a murderer in the eyes of the law . . . It seemed a crime to tell her.

He suggested: "Let's go a little farther away, Joyce.

I don't want that long-eared Whipple overhearing this."

Rather aimlessly, he led her a stone-toss west of the storage shed to a little clear place in the Keewatin spruces where the earliest dawn light was already graying the reindeer moss. Deeper in the woods a porcupine was gnawing at an ash sapling. A mottled snowshoe rabbit, not yet fully changed to his summer-time brown, hopped past as silently as a wraith. Belated waterfowl high overhead were honking northwest to their rookery grounds in the great Thal-Azzah. From deerbush thickets near at hand white-crowned sparrows, which less than an hour ago had sung their wistful little evening songs, were now beginning their daybreak calls.

Trying to prepare Joyce in some measure, he told her of Larry going into the shed, happening to notice a strange pack of furs, examining them, seeing the L. & H. marks and the serial numbers. He hesitated a moment then, with Joyce frowning perplexedly at those strange furs being in the shed; but there was no mercy possible now, and he took the final step.

"Joyce, I hate myself for telling you this. But you've got to know. Those furs in your father's shed are one of the packs stolen from the *Midnight Sun.*"

"Stolen? From the *Midnight Sun?* But Alan! What —what's it doing here?"

Even yet she did not understand. Her innocence almost unnerved Alan. Gentle toward her, but inexorable with the brutal facts, he said:

"This afternoon while you were asleep, Joyce, your father, or else one of these bandits, put the furs in there. That pack is—it must be his share in the arrangement. Joyce, your father is someway connected with these bandits."

Realization came slowly to Joyce. Watching her, torn with sympathy, Alan read the emotions that shook her—bewilderment at first, a shock as the terrible meaning dawned upon her, a growing anguish that hurt him as few things in his life had ever done. Then sharply, like an instinctive defense, came passionate disbelief and anger; and she drew a little away from him.

"I'm sorry, sorry," he said in heartfelt sympathy. "Your father used to be my friend. And he's your father; that's what hurts the worst."

Joyce drew still farther back from him, with her eyes flashing, with a defiant toss of her head. Alan saw now that her anger was against him—a fierce anger that flared up and scorched him with its flame. And Joyce found words then, a torrent of them, like a floodgate loosening—angry, ringing, stinging words that overwhelmed him like a shower of javelin darts.

He believed her father guilty! He had gone prying around for evidence! He was blind! Heartless! A man-hunting wolf! Inhuman! Worse. . . .

Alan was thoroughly surprised. He had seen Joyce handle insolent Indians and 'breeds, shooting their dialects at them like fluted Yellowknife arrows; but with him, with Bill, with her father, she had always been as quiet as a summer wind. The way she was assailing him now, defending her father, revealed a new depth to her nature.

Without a word of reply or self-protection, he took all she had to tell him. Her reaction was only natural, he thought—an instinctive flying to the defense of one who needed her and over whom the worst of disasters hovered. He felt that her anger was not so much against him personally as against the inexorable duty he represented.

So he took her javelin darts, and merely stood silent, with that hail of words shattering against him. But when it all ended, when Joyce turned away from him and broke down, sobbing in anguish, he could not endure that.

Awkwardly he walked around in front of her to face her again.

"Joyce, please don't," he begged. "Please listen. Maybe I am inhuman and a wolf, and've got sawdust where my brains ought to be. But also I'm . . . Don't you understand how I'm between the devil and the deep sea?"

Joyce was not hearing him. Gently Alan took her hands away from her face and held them in his own; and very tenderly he went on:

"Joyce, we can't afford personal feelings now. We've got to work together. That's why I wanted to talk with you. I want you to help me with something."

She listened to him finally; looked up, with tears still glistening on her cheeks.

"Alan, I don't believe—oh, I can't believe—about that pack. Alan, say it isn't so!"

Her bewildered misery tugged at Alan. He wanted to comfort her with some lie. But he dared not build up any hope, for he knew it would only prove a tragic disappointment to her in the end.

"Joyce, we've got to believe. The pack is there. No use going over to see if it is. Larry and I made no mistake. We mustn't blind ourselves to the truth."

Calmer now, a little contrite for her stinging reproaches, Joyce was all intent on finding some explanation that would clear her father.

She suggested eagerly: "Don't you think those furs might have got there some way besides—besides. . . . Alan! Don't you see?—that pack was *planted* there!

Those men knew you'd find it, and stop, and investigate, and arrest my dad! That would give them time and chance to escape——"

As gently as he could, Alan interrupted her. "No, Joyce. Your dad wasn't framed. Larry and I talked that possibility over. If those men had reasoned as you suggest, they'd have put the furs in a conspicuous place where we'd have been sure to find them. But Larry's discovery was pure accident. The pack wasn't planted. Let's not delude ourselves."

He saw she was still clinging to her belief; and because he must prepare her for the inevitable in the weeks ahead, he added:

"Joyce, let's try to look at the evidence as *others* will see it. Your father is absent, and has been for four days, just at this particular time. There is the question of these bandits being strangers and yet getting about this country so well. There's the fact that he was bitter against the big companies and probably was tempted to retaliate against them in the only way in his power. And, Joyce, there's the bale of furs; that evidence alone is enough to prove a connection. . . ."

Joyce listened to him piling up the evidence, but the entire staggering total of it did not sway her. Against it she set all she knew of her father's nature. In her whole life she had never seen him enter a penny of false debt against the most ignorant Indian, or deviate a hair's breadth from his word of honor. He even went beyond mere honesty in his dealings with the Indians. Many a time in winter when starvation caught the thriftless bands, she had seen him give lavishly, losing hundreds of dollars, even though he knew that when spring came and they were *du plein ventre* again, they would sneak their peltry to one of the big companies and snicker in their lousy deer-skin *tokas* at making a

fool of Trader MacMillan. She often had thought that the only person in the world her dad had ever wronged was himself. Though he had been drinking heavily and taking up with none-too-unwilling Indian women, it seemed contrary to his whole nature to plot with bandits, to gang with murderers.

She simply could not believe him guilty of this crime. But from Alan's words, "As others will see it," she realized that her opinion was of utterly no consequence. It would be blown away like a wisp of smoke at the first blast of the Law.

As Alan finished his reluctant indictment, her resolve hardened. . . . She was going to fight for her father and defend him with every weapon in her power.

One way shot into her mind. Her proud head dropped a little, and she asked hesitantly: "Alan, do you have to arrest him? Only you and Mr. Younge and I know about these furs being here. If you could —if we could someway cover it up——"

She checked the plea. She could not bring herself to put Alan in so fearful a dilemma. Looking up, she met his gaze squarely again. "No, I can't, I won't ask *that* of you. I'd never ask that." In another moment she added, "You said there was something I could help you with, Alan."

"Yes, there is." He chose his words very carefully. "The question with me, Joyce, is this: How deeply is your father involved? I can't think he'd go the whole length with these bandits. I can't think he'd countenance murder or even so brazen a robbery as these men staged. Perhaps they deluded him about their intentions. If they're caught, they're going to lie and throw as much of the blame on him as they can. But if I can have the truth as a working basis, I can nail

their lies. We can't hope to save him from a penalty, but we maybe can save him from the—the worst."

Joyce blanched at the last word, at the specter it aroused. Her father stood charged with murder. In her heart the Law suddenly became a tangible and fearsome thing. How mighty its power, how inexorable its grip, how terrible its slow ponderous will, like a mountain moving! Into her thoughts flitted a memory of a time in far-away Ontario when she had listened to the hammering of a scaffold going up. A man was to be hanged there. The incident had impressed her then; she had heard that dreadful hammering for days afterwards; and now the memory of it terrified her.

Alan went on: "You stand a better chance of getting the truth from him than I do, Joyce. He'd suspect me if I tried to talk to him. But with you he'd be more frank and open. When he comes in, won't you try to find out what you can?"

"Shall I tell him you discovered the furs, Alan?"

"I wouldn't. Not yet. He'd probably try to escape. He'd become an outlaw. He can't escape; and to try it would merely be damning himself doubly in the opinion of a jury."

"You mean I'm to watch him and gather what hints I can, and perhaps ask questions that seem innocent?"

"That's exactly it, Joyce. Exactly what I meant. If you'll do that for me, if you'll help me that much . . . Joyce, don't you see why I told you this? Don't you see it's because I'm going to stick with you? I won't see your dad railroaded. I'll help him to the limit I can —because he's *your* father."

Bill Hardsock came out of the store and looked around for Alan. The sky was graying; the few big stars which had appeared during the brief period of

twilight were fading out. The dark river was still perilous, but the minutes this day would be precious, and Alan felt that danger to his patrol and men was secondary to danger of the bandits escaping.

He turned to Joyce again, facing her in the ghostly morning light. Again he was conscious that his four months of absence, breaking the friendship between them, had invested her with an aura of strangeness to him; and that all during this brief fateful visit he had become aware of her in a quickened sense. How brave and comradely a girl! And in spite of her hard life here, in spite of her efforts to be a good bush-loper, how winsome and girlish and adorable she was!

Unwilling to detain him, Joyce offered him her hand, wishing him success today, hiding her fears for him when he should come up with those men. Alan clasped her small hand, for a moment held it; and then in sympathy for *les misères* she had fallen upon, in overwhelming tenderness at this last and worst anguish of them all, he bent nearer her, he bent down a little to kiss her, as more than once he had done in the years past. It was an impulsive act; he was swept by admiration of her bravery, of her girlish prettiness. And it was a humble act of contrition, too, and self-reproach; for he had said to himself that if he had kept up his visits here, instead of leaving Joyce all alone to the battle, he might have halted Dave MacMillan's plunge into crime.

Joyce did not draw away. She looked up at him with steady eyes, neither resisting nor yielding, but seeming to ask some great question of him. There was something in her clear eyes which checked Alan; something which silently told him that he himself had broken off that former intimacy and could not resume it now, when *he* liked, on the old casual terms. He did not

understand her great question, but he did sharply feel that the right to what he was asking for was no longer his. Joyce had withdrawn it. With her that right had become significant and sacred.

She went with him down to the wharf and stood watching the patrol embark. A gray smoke-mist rising from the water made travel doubly dangerous; and as Pedneault slid into the wheel seat, Alan gave him orders to proceed carefully. He himself stepped out upon the prow and crouched there, holding a davit, to search ahead for bars and granite rocks.

At the first bend above, he turned to look back. Vaguely through the mist he saw Joyce still standing on the wharf in the gray chill of earliest morning. As he waved to her and caught the tiny white of her kerchief answering, he was remembering, with a sense of having lost something precious, that Joyce had refused his kiss. But overshadowing everything was a poignant sympathy for this brave, spirited girl who had been so good a comrade of his and now had fallen upon such evil days.

When the mist had hidden her from him, he turned his eyes ahead. Somewhere on up the spruce-buried Alooska were those six bandit strangers, rifle-armed and desperate and certain to give battle. Against them he was pitting his life and the lives of his men today.

CHAPTER VII: RIFLES IN THE PROW

FIFTY miles above the MacMillan Trading Store, where a spur of low hills flanked the Alooska, Alan ordered Pedneault to swerve in toward the north bank and stop.

He believed those bandits could not be very far ahead now. If he failed to sight them before they heard the launch coming, it meant disaster to his patrol and possibly death to his men. Across this silent wilderness the roar of the engine carried for five or six miles. Warned of pursuit, those criminals might lift their canoes back into the timber and let the Police go harmlessly past. Likelier still, they might lay an ambush where the river was narrow, and open on the launch with repeating rifles at a murderous point-blank range. But if he located them on up-stream, he could slip upon them quietly in the paddle craft and lay a deadly ambush himself.

The grim ruthless mood of those moments when he stood in the dim cabin of the *Midnight Sun* still burned like a flame in Alan. In his service years he had sternly lived up to the Mounted tradition of "shooting last," and had drilled it into his men; but he felt that these bandits who had murdered Jimmy Montgomery and abducted a girl, had forfeited all right to human mercy. He wanted only an excuse to shoot them down like a pack of marauding wolves. In the battle ahead, if he had to expose these men of his to the slightest risk of death in order to make prisoners of those criminals, he meant to make no prisoners.

Taking a pair of binoculars he splashed ashore and hurried up a hill to its summit. There on the crest a single tree grew out of a tangle of glacier-scarred boulders. An old tamarack, low and squat and fearfully storm-gnarled, it reared its head a couple dozen feet above the ridge line. By climbing to its swaying topmost branch, he had a clear view of a long river "straight" reaching twenty miles up-stream.

The timber was fast thinning out now. To north and east the country was taking on the wild amphibious character of the watery Thal-Azzah. From his lofty perch a dozen great muskegs were visible, cut by a network of small sluggish creeks and dotted with half a thousand lakes.

From a willow island just above the launch, he moved his glasses slowly up-stream, praying for a glimpse of those two outlaw canoes. Carefully focusing, he scrutinized the river, the banks on either side with their little curves and hollows; and searched above the trees for a wisp of camp smoke.

Mile after mile his glasses moved up the Alooska, on and on into the hazy distance. He came at last to the great sweeping bend far-away northeast where vision was cut off. Nothing, nothing whatsoever, of two creeping black dots. The bandits were twenty miles ahead at least.

As he hurried back down to the launch, he began to realize that those two canoes had traveled more swiftly than he had thought possible. They probably had not stopped at all during the semi-darkness, but had driven themselves on, throwing all their strength into this dash for the great Forks of the Alooska and the Thal-Azzah on beyond.

For the first time in his Police experience Alan found himself ill at ease and uncertain of what he was run-

ning into. This entire affair—robbery, murder, escape —had an element of darkness to it. Though he could understand, on the assumption of Dave MacMillan's guilt, how the bandits knew just the right moves to make in this dimly-known country, still he was utterly unable to explain how six absolute strangers, six bearded men of outlandish sort, could get into this country unseen. Who they were, where they had come from, how they had got in here unknown to everybody —the whole thing was uncanny. He hardly knew what to expect of them next.

Splashing back upon the launch, he told his men tersely: "They're not in sight yet, and I could see for twenty miles. We've got to meet up with them before they reach the Forks. They're making tracks. Ped, you've light to drive by now. We'll take our chances."

It was chances they did take, during that next half-hour. Dangerous at all times from floating débris and shifting sand bars, the river was doubly treacherous now, with granite boulders hidden beneath its freshet-muddied waters.

Above the sweeping bend which had cut off his view, Alan raced ashore again, climbed another tree and searched ahead with aching eyes. No far straight reach this time, but a number of sharp curves where timbered headlands hid long portions of the river from him. Cursing at the loss of precious minutes, he hung in the tree top, thumbing the glasses one-handed, and waited till he made sure that if the canoes had been out of sight behind one of these timbered points, they would have reappeared on the open water.

Still he caught no glimpse of them.

Twice more that morning, between Pedneault's reckless dashes, he hurried ashore and futilely searched ahead. Something had gone wrong. The patrol should

be within sight of them. Estimating their speed and the speed of the pursuing launch, he knew the Police craft should have overhauled them about eighty miles above the MacMillan Trading Post. He had come a hundred and twenty, and no sight of them yet. They had either dodged aside, or had done something to give them a big edge over what he thought possible.

It was afterwards, when the waters of the Alooska had given up their ghastly secret, that Joyce MacMillan listened to the accounts of several Yellowknife men and gazed upon certain grim evidence, and pieced together the story of how those bandits were able to keep in the lead. But Alan knew nothing of that harrowing story now; he knew only that something had upset all his calculations.

Fifteen miles from the Alooska Forks he went ashore a last time and climbed a squat tree. With the specter of failure plucking him by the sleeve, he scanned the river northeast. The timber had thinned to scattered stances, with scarcely a fringe along the low stream banks. The river was broad, with no side creeks to dodge into and no drogues where an ambush could be laid.

He had a clear view to the Forks. In his hurried focusing he missed his quarry at the first sweep. But in the next the glasses picked up a sight that set his heart pounding madly against his ribs.

Far ahead, three short miles from the Forks of the Alooska, a pair of tiny black objects, like bugs crawling along a silver ribbon . . .

He jumped out of the tree, leaped down the slope.

Splashing abroad, he flung all caution to the winds. . . . "Throw into it, Pedneault! We've got to beat them to the Forks. We'll close in on them in the launch. Got to! They'll hear us but they won't stop, won't

fight, if they can make it there. Open her up! To hell with rocks and mud bars now!"

His last words were drowned in the engine roar as Pedneault opened out the launch. Under his superb control the Police craft tore up the river like a low-slung racer, rearing half out of water, scaring up flocks of panic-stricken waterfowl, lurching and side-slipping giddily as it careened around the sweeping bends. It grazed midstream rocks that would have smashed it to splinters; skimmed past blocks of heavy ice that would have knocked it out of the water; tore through floating rafts of thin slob with a rip and crash, while Bill and Larry tossed in their seats, while the two recruits clung desperately to whatever their hands seized.

With the wind stinging his eyes and the spray lashing him, Alan clutched the painter to keep from being flung bodily overboard, and gave Pedneault what help he could.

Toward the end of the dash Bill and Larry crept up past the driver's seat and crouched behind the prow half-deck, their rifles at ready, their hats jammed tight upon their foreheads. Slumped down out of sight below the gunwale, Whipple was fumbling at his cartridge belt, equally fearful of a rifle fight ahead and of the dizzy wild dash of the launch.

The craft careened around the last bend, a scant mile from the great Y of the Alooska. A clear open stretch lay in front. Dashing the blinding spray from his eyes, Alan rose precariously to his feet, looked ahead; and his heart sank as the truth was borne in upon him.

Those canoes had beaten him to the Forks.

It was maddening, his defeat—doubly maddening for its closeness to a smashing triumph. He had come within five minutes of overhauling them in the launch,

and then had missed, had missed by a mile that loomed gigantic as two hundred. All his hopes, his plans, had centered on running them down before they reached the fatal Forks. But they had beaten him. They had heard the thundering boat, had flung their whole strength into the race; and now were whipping on eastward along one or other of the Alooska branches.

The launch would have to be abandoned at the Forks. From what Joyce had told him of the water stages, he knew the Police boat would be stranded or wrecked within half a mile if it attempted to go up either of those shallow streams. He would have to take to paddle canoes and split his party.

As the hurtling craft covered that last mile, Alan fought down his bitter disappointment and looked steadily at an ugly situation. The specter of failure was plucking at him again; luck had broken against him; the best he could hope for now was a fight against odds of two to one. There was a fearful likelihood that the three of his party who met up with those criminals would get wiped out.

Unbeaten, he planned swiftly. The chances were ten to one that the bandits had darted up the left branch leading northeast into the Thal-Azzah. He decided quickly: "*I'll* follow that left branch. I'll take one canoe and two men. I'll take Bill with me; he's a red-haired devil in a fight, he's our best shot, he'll be dependable in whatever comes. But the third man—Ped or Larry?" Between those two, both splendid men, both experienced veterans of many a patrol, he debated a moment. Pedneault was loyal, recklessly brave, a good shot; but Larry was far the cooler man, and Larry's keen trailing powers might be needed if these bandits cut aside.

He made up his mind: "I'll send Ped up the right

branch with Burgoon and Whipple. Bill and Larry and I'll shoot up the left. *We*'ll be the ones to do business."

As the great Y of the Alooska loomed up, he turned and gestured to Hardsock and Larry. Silently understanding, they crept back to the stern deck, unlashed the canoes and had them ready by the time that Pedneault, slowing down the launch, steered it in between two little willow islands at the Forks and stopped.

Alan ordered him: "Ped, take these two men and whip up the south branch. Larry and Bill and I'll cover the north. If you sight them, don't pitch into that pack. You'd be fighting six men single-handed. If they did happen to go that way, you drop back here to the Forks and wait for us. We'll be able to track them in that timber country. Now Ped, I'm trusting you to be careful. Do exactly as I say. Let's pile out. They can't be over a mile and a half away."

Bill snarled: "Hell's blue blazes, Alan!—let's stick together. Us splitting this up like this, it's the damnedest fool trick I ever heard of!"

"Shut up!" Alan snapped. "General's orders, not mine. Every damned thing you say or do will be tattled to him." He tossed the launch anchor into the mud. "I said pile out. Let's be moving." He stepped down into a canoe, stood rifle between his knees, caught up a paddle.

Cursing beneath their breath, Bill and Larry clambered in with him.

The two canoes separated.

Alan's estimate that his quarry could not be more than a mile and a half in the lead, was true enough; but a stern chase is a long chase, and if those bandits were aching from exhaustion, they had the fear of death in their hearts to goad them on.

As he and Larry and Bill bent to the paddle work and skirled up the north branch, Alan prophesied, to bolster up the courage of his two comrades: "We'll overhaul them before they can dodge aside. They haven't a ghost of a chance to keep ahead. They're heavy loaded; we're sitting on top the water. We're fresh to the paddle; they're worn down by thirty hours of it, and those last couple miles surely wilted them."

A little later, not knowing what minute they would be plunged into a rifle battle, he instructed:

"When we come up with them, when we get in fair distance, Bill, you do the long-range rifle talking. You're the marksman. Larry and I'll steady the boat and keep you in range. Shoot low, low, Bill; you can miss the men but not the boats. Glance your bullets off the water. Tear holes in those canoes. If we get that pack afoot, we've got them."

After the all-morning roar of the launch, the silence was like a din in their ears. Alan could hear Larry's harsh breathing, the swish of water in the V-wake behind, and Bill's grunting gasp at each heave of his paddle. Clothes sodden with sweat, paddles bending in quick powerful rhythm, they toiled on.

A whole hour, an hour of terrible labor, went by, and still no sight or sound of the bandits. Every bend of the tortuous river was a hope to Alan; every open stretch beyond was a disappointment. With the responsibility of this patrol on him, with human lives, the lives of comrades, at stake, a fear gripped him that those bandits had taken the south branch of the Alooska. If they had, Frank Pedneault and those two raw recruits might run into an ambush; or Ped might attack them, reckless fellow that he was, practically lone-handed, and get killed.

It seemed ages to Alan that he had been sitting in this canoe, throwing all his strength and will into an ash-heart paddle. The chase was entering the Thal-Azzah itself, that watery wilderness of lakes and labyrinthine channels and muskeg thousands of square miles in extent. They were out of the timber country; the land was too soggy for trees. The last struggling tamarack and paper birch had yielded to niggerhead, the deerbush to tall flags and marsh reeds higher than a man's head and hands. The river had become sluggish and broad and shallow, with mudflats reaching back from the water edge. In long S-curves it wound on deeper into the barrens, as fat and lazy and sinuous as a coiled boa.

So far no tributary streams had come in, and the bandits had had no chance to slip aside. But not far ahead the branch split into a dozen channels leading in every direction. Pursuit would end there. A few miles more, and those canoes would be swallowed up in the watery oblivion of the Thal-Azzah.

But then, as he skirled around a headland, his prophecy yesterday to Haskell, and his conviction, founded on long man-hunting experience, that those bandits would surely follow this left branch, were suddenly proved true to the letter. On ahead, a scant thousand yards, he caught one fleeting glimpse of two heavily-laden canoes that carried six men.

Dipping faster, deeper, he and Bill and Larry paddled at a furious pace to come up within rifle range. The river was so winding that they could see only a few hundred yards in front. There was danger, a terrible danger, of running headlong into a blind ambush where all three of them would be killed outright and their canoes sunk before they even could start to shoot

back. Every stroke, every curve, every clump of flags they skimmed close past, was a deadly peril. They knew it, but they dared not slow up. They were taking their chances.

As they skirled out upon a shallow little lake fringed about with tall flags, Larry suddenly heaved back on his paddle.

"Lift out! Look! Alan, look over there!"

Alan looked where he pointed, at the north shore, at the wall of dense reeds. And then he too saw. By himself he might never have noticed it; but now with Larry pointing it out, the sign was conspicuous. A path had been broken through the flags there; the reeds were parted, some of them trampled, their tops bent to either side. . . .

It told the story to him. Hard-pressed, those men had whipped ashore to shake off pursuit; had lifted canoes to shoulder, and were trying to cut north and hit another channel.

Oblivious to ambush danger, they skimmed over to the telltale break in the flags and drove out upon the mud. Thinking only that they were so hot on the trail that their quarry had taken to cover, Alan and Bill slung the canoe upon their shoulders; and with Larry in the lead, following the signs, they started at a lope back through the flags.

Within a few hundred yards they came to a little creek, a sluggish muskrat highway that led north. The bandits had taken to it. Too shallow for a canoe, they had had to wade. So recently had they passed, the water was still roiled from their boots.

The little creek took Alan's party a thousand yards north to a lake, a deep blue lake covering several acres; and there, within the Thal-Azzah itself, late in the afternoon, the long relentless chase came to its end.

Larry, a dozen steps in the lead, glimpsed the silvery sheen of water ahead; and stopping dead-short he motioned Bill and Larry to be cautious. Edging out of the stream bed into the reeds to keep out of sight, he peered ahead with the hawk-sharp eyes of a Chipewyan trailer, searching the lake and the flags around it.

The other two turned aside into the reeds and crept up beside him.

"You spotted them, Larry?" Bill asked. "Whereabouts?"

"I think maybe so. I don't see anything of the men themselves, but . . We'll sneak up closer where we can get a better look-see."

They bellied forward toward the lake edge where the flags were thin and they had clear view.

The lake was deserted except for a few timid mudhens skulking among the reeds. There were no waterfowl on its surface, as there should have been; the bandits had flushed them. On the east side a channel led away, plenty deep for canoes.

Bill saw the channel, saw nothing of the bandits, and demanded sharply: "What're we stopping here for, Larry? See the creek yonder? They might have left by it."

"I don't think so. I think they're right close."

"You better be damn good and sure of that! If they're making tracks on east while we're laying here——"

"Shut up, Bill," Alan interposed. "Let Larry have his head. He can trail circles around you and me put together."

After several minutes of waiting, Larry pointed across the lake and stated quietly:

"You see that big patch of brownish flags over there, about thirty or forty yards back from the water? See

that little run leading back into them? That's where our men are hiding. They're laying low along that little run."

The other men had seen nothing, heard nothing whatsoever; yet Larry's tones left no doubt that he *knew*.

"Good Lord!" Bill gasped, startled by his comrade's uncanny powers. "How do you know all that?"

"Well, I just noticed a rat start up that run. He come back in a *hurry*. Then, there's a silent spot over there where I don't hear any bird or animal calls. And then some other signs. . . ." He was silent for half a minute. Finally he whispered: "I'll show you a sign. You see that pair of canvasbacks a-coming this way?" Very cautiously parting the screen of flags with his hand, he pointed across the lake and on north over the acres of marshland. "Watch that pair! They're flying low, making for this lake. Canvasbacks like blue water. Watch 'em close."

Skimming just over the flags, the pair of graceful ducks came on; but just as they stopped beating and started the glide down upon the lake, they suddenly breasted high up in the air, *exactly over the spot Larry had indicated*. Veering away, they winged swiftly out of sight into the west.

Alan glanced admiringly at his lean-faced partner. No novice himself at water-dogging or following a Strong-Woods trail, he could fully appreciate what Larry had just done. To spot those hidden men so infallibly, on such slight clues—how simple when explained, how magical beforehand! Not one Swampy Cree or Chipewyan in a hundred could match the trick that Larry just now had shown them so casually. And yet, Alan thought, Haskell had busted Younge for not being facile enough with yes-sir's and salutes.

"Why d'you suppose they're laying low over there, Alan?" Larry asked. "Why didn't they keep traveling?"

"There was a danger they'd run into us if they kept on the move. They're waiting for dusk and giving us time to get out of this particular territory. We'd better watch our step and not give ourselves away. They've probably got a sentinel posted to watch their back trail. They think they've slipped us. If they don't suspect we're around, we can surprise them that much harder."

Lying there in the reeds and bog, Alan studied the bandit covert and tried to plan. If all five of his men had been along with him, the outcome would have been swift and certain. He could have come at the bandits from either side, cut off any chance of escape, boxed them between two fires and deliberately shot them down. But he had split his party at the Alooska Forks, as Haskell ordered. Now, at this crucial hour here in the Thal-Azzah, Pedneault and those other two men, uselessly following that south branch, were a hundred and forty miles away.

Bill and Larry had been holding a whispered debate, and now they put their ideas up to Alan. Bill wanted to sneak closer and pitch into the six criminals forthwith. Younge wanted to stay here in the water-edge flags and wait. He urged that in all probability the bandits at twilight would come back across the lake and leave by its sole outlet. Three men in cover could rip up their canoes and kill the men in half a dozen rounds.

Alan saw weaknesses in either idea. Bill's fire-eating plan would be nearly suicidal, though it had the merit of forcing the battle. Larry's plan all depended upon the bandits coming back across the lake. They might

not do that; they might start on north to hit the next waterway, and so escape without a shot being fired.

As he planned, rejected and planned again, in a struggle to overcome those heavy odds, a brooding quiet settled over the little lake. Waterfowl began dropping back upon the limpid blue surface; muskrats, abroad all day in that season, reappeared along the edges; a pair of stately trumpeter swans winged out of the east and glided down and floated in the center like great white puffs of feathers.

Alan finally came to his decision.

"We've got to carry the fight to them, and we've got to keep them from getting away by that creek yonder. There's only one way we can do both those things. Bill and I are going to circle around them on foot and come at them from the other side. We'll get there somehow, even if we have to swim part way. We'll belly up as close as we can. With any luck at all we ought to get into a position where we can put two or three of them out of business at the very beginning, before they wake up to us.

"If our luck is out, if they discover we're sneaking up, they'll probably try to back away from us. They won't fight if they can help it. Why should they take chances on some of them getting wounded or killed, if they don't have to? They'll try to whip back across this lake and dodge into that channel yonder. Now, Larry, you'll stay here to head that off. Keep out of sight yourself; have a couple or three extra magazines handy, and wait till they get out into the middle. When they get in good range, open up on them. We two'll break through to the lake edge and help you out. Shoot at the wind-water line of their canoes. Don't try to 'get' those men at all. *Sink those canoes.* We don't care about those men. Let them swim ashore and hide if

they want to. On foot a man can't make ten miles a week in this muskrat country. With no tent, no shelter, the mosquitoes and flies would drive them crazy in less than a day, and they'd fall into our hands.

"We've got about two hours yet till beginning twilight. That'll give us time to carry out my idea carefully. We're going to have just one chance at them. If we muddle it, they'll be gone. In these flags, in all this maze of channels, they could lose us in three or four hundred yards. If you understand now what's cut out for us, we'll be starting."

Both men nodded.

Bill and Alan backed away with infinite caution, for one flushing waterfowl would raise all the others. The lake by this time was alive with merganser, teal, ducks, wavies; and the pair of swans, looking around warily, were outstretching their long necks as though sensing an enemy unseen. Yard by cautious yard the two men slipped back into the rushes till they were a safe distance from the lake.

Then they began the long hard job of circling around the bandits.

Mosquitoes rose about them in clouds as they made their way through the flags. Vicious *brûlés* and big yellow-banded caribou flies hit them like the slap of a hornet. The water was ankle-deep everywhere; the soil under it was a boggy muck that quivered and gurgled under their tread. Again and again they came to little runs and creeks. Some they stepped over or waded; at others Alan handed the weapons to Bill, swam across, and caught the guns as they were tossed to him.

Wet, muddy, tortured by the insect pests, they pushed steadily on, mindful of coming twilight.

Their worst fear was the danger of scaring up waterfowl. Other eyes besides theirs might interpret that

sign. Whenever a pair of geese or cloud of teal flew overhead, they crouched down and "froze" till the birds were past. They had to make a long patient detour around an acre of niggerhead where a colony of black tern, hundreds and hundreds of them, were sitting on their rookery tussocks, gabbling in neighborly fashion but ready to explode like a bag of feathers in wild squawking alarm.

In the flags around them they heard the splash of muskrats and the occasional slap of a beaver's tail. Rails and yellowlegs and skulkers slipped quietly out of their path and hid in the dense reeds. Against the blood-red light of the western sky the undulating flight of wavies, gray and white, showed up in striking silhouette. With the sinking of the sun a weird medley of noises began to arise—the gibbering of red-throated loons, the boom of "thunder-pumps," the swelling chorus of "knee-deep" frogs and "better-go-rounds," the honking and trumpeting of innumerable geese and ducks and cranes.

It took an hour and a half to make the wide careful circle and start coming in toward the bandits from the north. With the sun cut in two by the western horizon and the chill of twilight in the air, those six men would shortly be on the move. But Alan's hopes had risen again; it seemed that he indeed "had taken his luck along." The bandits did not know they were being stalked. In half an hour more, if luck held, he and Bill would be in position to open on them all unawares.

Dropping at last to hands and knees, the two of them crawled along through muck and water, keeping only their guns dry. They came up within a hundred yards of their quarry.

Ahead of them lay a muskrat pond where their shelter, the tall flags, gave out. The pond was covered with

water a couple feet deep. Green reeds stuck up a foot above the surface, and a dozen big muskrat houses were scattered here and there in it. Alan thought that the rat which Larry had noticed must have been making for this very colony. On the other side of the pond, straight in the direction where Larry was waiting, was half an acre of dry ground covered with tall brownish flags. There was the hiding place of the bandits; there they had secreted themselves, to wait till deep twilight.

As he parted the reeds in front of his face to study this dry plot, Alan saw the tops of a clump over there sway suspiciously. A moment later he glimpsed the dim outline of a man standing up, stretching himself, sitting down again.

In actual sight now, those men who had killed Jimmy Montgomery! And only a pistol shot away! But to take them . . . Alan cursed savagely at the thought of Pedneault and those two men a hundred and forty miles distant. As he remembered what Haskell said about the law being behind his patrol, his lips curled in scorn at the cant expression. . . . "The law that's supposed to be back of us, I wonder where in hell it is now! What does it mean to Bill and me now?" Here in this watery wilderness in the creeping twilight, he and Bill were going up against six men who had stood off fifty and who had murder charges hanging over their heads. And if they broke away, Larry single-handed would have to stand the whole brunt of stopping them.

At his gesture Bill slid cautiously up beside him. Alan twisted his head and stared a moment at his partner; and in spite of their situation, a smile flickered over his face. Never very regimental even when slicked up for inspection, Bill was an incredible sight now, with

his tousled red hair a shaggy mop, his clothes all plastered with mud, his grimy face bristling with a three-days beard. A caribou fly had bitten him just above the ear, and a tiny streak of crimson was trickling down to his bulldog jaw.

In whispers, Alan said to him: "Bill, we've got to get closer. We've got to get across this pond. These muskrat houses out there are particularly good luck for us. By keeping down in the water, with these little reeds to help hide us, we can sneak from one house to the next. The last one isn't a dozen yards from those men. If we make it we'll have point-blank range and the best kind of cover to shoot from."

Taking off their hats and jackets, they wriggled carefully out of the tall flags, eased into the water and squirmed toward the first muskrat house, which stood up four feet above the surface and entirely hid their approach. Behind it they stopped a moment, chose their next one, and sank back into the water. Holding their rifles and belt-guns above the surface, they wriggled toward the second house, keeping themselves immersed to the chin.

As they crouched down behind the third little dome of mud and reeds, a towering red-bearded man parted the flags they were staring at, bent and scooped up a hatful of water, took a swallow, threw the rest down with an oath at its vile taste; and then, shaking the water out of his hat, he disappeared again.

Alan's last secret doubt about these bandits being utter strangers in the country was dispelled now. He had had a clear view of this huge red-headed leader; he could say positively, as Ashmun and all the passengers had sworn, that he had never laid eyes on the man before.

To Bill he whispered: "When we reach that last

house, I'll splash or do something to draw their attention. They'll come out to the flags edge again to see what it is. Don't shoot when just one man shows up. We'll wait till we have three of them in plain sight. If we get three of them at the first crack, we'll be fighting the other three on even terms. Now Bill, when you're looking down a rifle barrel at those men, don't hesitate. Aim *straight*. We can't make prisoners of that outfit. This is a finish fight. One or the other party is going to get wiped out. Let's be moving now. Dusk is coming along."

They started for the fourth muskrat house.

Halfway there, disaster overwhelmed them, sudden and stunning.

It came from the air, in the shape of a pair of red-throated loons. Flapping heavily out of the west, the birds dropped with a loud splash not ten feet away from the two men.

Both Alan and Bill "froze" again, holding their breath, praying that the loons would swim leisurely away. At the splash Alan heard a muffled oath over in the flags; then a rustling movement, as though the bandits had nervously jumped for their guns; then silence. And then a voice from the twilight among the reeds:

"Nothin'. Jus' a pair of divers plumped down."

The alarm would have blown over if the loons had swum off. But the birds, crop-heavy and indolent, stayed where they were, showing no intention of moving away. As the female started preening herself, the mate turned its eye suspiciously at the two strange objects sticking above the water.

What startled it Alan never knew. Bill did not move; he himself did not bat an eyelash. But in that jumpy taut silence the male suddenly threw open its

beak and sent up a raucous maniacal shriek, as though some animal had seized it by the neck.

Instantly its mate joined in. The jarring, ear-splitting discord set muskrats diving off their houses and flushed every waterfowl in the lake a hundred yards distant. With a last frantic peal the loons taxied over the water, finally managed to take wing, and flapped heavily away.

But the damage had been done beyond retrieve. All that hour and a half of careful stalking, all the great caution and pains of slipping unawares upon the bandits, had been set at naught by the crazy shriek of a crazy loon.

The air was suddenly full of the swish and whirr of wings. Over in the murky twilight of the flags there was a commotion, sharp orders, the click of rifle bolts. At the edge of the flags a gun *cra-aa-cked,* a rope of flame reached out, a bullet ricocheted off the water.

It was a shrewd maneuver from the bandits, a tentative shot to draw the fire of their stalkers and discover where they were. Alan was quick-witted enough to see their motive and to lie low; but Bill jerked his rifle against his cheek and shot point-blank at the spurt of fire.

A cry of pain went up. His bullet had scored. But the shot gave away their hiding. With all hope gone now of getting the drop, Alan scrambled behind cover of a muskrat house, fairly dragging Bill after him.

Half a dozen rifles exploded in the flags. Their bullets *splaated* into the mud, plunked into the water, sizzled hotly across the pond. Alan thrust his rifle over the top of the house and emptied it at the flashes. A bullet from a Savage, a sharp-cracking deadly Savage, hit his weapon, smashed the mechanism, numbed his

hand, and drove jagged fiery bits of steel into his fingers.

Bill started to rise up, up above the tiny mound, to get in a better shot. Alan jerked him back.

"You fool! You damned fool! Keep down! You want to get killed? We can't see them, but against this water they can see us plain!"

For several minutes the bullets of the bandits beat a thudding tattoo against the mud mound. As best they could, Alan and Bill lifted their belt-guns over the top of their shelter, and fired back. They heard no more yelps of pain. They were shooting wildly, aimlessly. Realizing this, believing the bandits had crept into the run and were sheltered by its banks, Alan stopped shooting and checked Bill.

Yonder in the reeds the fire died away raggedly. A silence fell. A minute lengthened into two, three, four. Alan heard, or thought he heard, a faint rustling, a faint gurgling of water. He listened intently, but did not hear it again.

With his plans all shattered, with the twilight steadily deepening, he was torn with desperation. If he and Bill moved, it was sheer suicide. If they crouched much longer where they were, the bandits would certainly slip away from them in the coming dark. They might already be backing off, down the muskrat run, toward the lake.

As he fought to think of a plan that would break this deadlock, he heard a long whistle, a clear shrill whistle from Larry's direction. It was Larry signaling.

He sprang up. "Bill! They've backed away, they've slipped us, they're breaking for the lake! Larry's alone. We've got to help Larry!"

They slashed out of the pond and into the flags, in a frantic effort to reach the lake edge. The marsh

reeds clutched at them, tripped them, wrapped around their legs. Savagely they tore their way on through to get into the clear in time to help Larry stop those bandits.

As he swung his clubbed rifle, smashing a pathway in front of him, Alan heard a lone gun *cr-aa-ck* over on the lake, and heard the snarl of half a dozen repeating weapons answering it like an echo. They drowned, they overwhelmed it. . . . The lone gun did not speak again.

It seemed hours to him that he fought and tore through the dense flags, to reach the open and help a comrade who was standing up against six rifles. Before he broke through to the clear, the uneven battle had ended. As he burst out to the lake edge, he had a glimpse of the Police canoe drifting helplessly out in the middle; and across at the far side he saw two long blurred objects just entering the deep-water channel.

Not yet realizing what had happened to Larry, he whipped up his belt-gun and emptied it at those two craft. In the twilight, at that long range, it was a futile gesture of heart-sickened despair. His enemies did not even shoot back at him, but skirled on and vanished in the purple dusk.

Numbed and dazed at those six men escaping, there was a moment when Alan could only realize that his patrol had failed. That those criminals had vanished into the twilight and were lost in this watery wilderness, with pursuit utterly hopeless now.

In the next moment he heard a sound, a sound like a groaning voice calling his name. It drew his eyes to the drifting Police craft. What was it doing out there? Like a flash he understood what Larry had done. When the bandits started across the lake to escape, Larry must have seen he could never stop them in the

semi-darkness except at point-blank range. In the Police canoe he must have come fearlessly out at them, alone. This first deadly volley had got him. That groaning voice was Larry's.

Bill came bursting through to the clear. Alan whirled on him:

"Bill! They got Larry. He's wounded. Hard hit. Here . . ." Tossing Bill his belt-gun and broken rifle, he ran out into breast-deep water and struck out powerfully for the drifting canoe.

By a provident mercy he reached it in time. With half a dozen holes spouting water into it, the craft was filling, tilting, about to overturn.

Larry lay at the bottom of it, writhing in pain.

To clamber in would have swamped the waterlogged canoe instantly. By heroic struggles, swimming, pushing a dead-weight ahead of him, Alan got the craft into shoal water, put his hand under its keel then, and kept it afloat.

He dragged it to the bank just as Bill came splashing around the lake edge to join him.

"Alan! What happened? Where'd they go?"

"They got away. They're gone—*gone*. Forget it. Help me, Bill—with Larry——"

Together they bent over their bleeding, stricken comrade, and together they lifted him tenderly ashore.

CHAPTER VIII: THE BROKEN SWORD

By the light of an electric torch Alan cut away Larry's clothing and examined his wounds. Larry had been shot twice, and both wounds were fearsome. One bullet, a ricocheting slug, had struck him squarely in the knee, cruelly shattering the bones. The second had pierced his chest high up, just beneath the shoulder, and had passed entirely through his body.

As they bent over their stricken comrade, so limp and ghastly pale, and thought of him sharing the toil and danger of that day and coming out lone-handed against six rifles, a great pity swept Alan and Bill and unnerved them, hardened though they were. There were tears in Bill's eyes; his voice was a hoarse broken whisper:

"Larry—poor Larry—shot down like this. . . . Alan, he's—he's dying——"

Unable to endure the sight, Bill turned away. Steeling himself to the ordeal, Alan worked desperately with tourniquet and tiny medicine kit till he had stanched the bleeding. Before he finished, Larry was rousing faintly from the bullet-shock. Nearly delirious with pain and loss of blood, he began stirring and moaning.

Half an hour later, when Alan had done all he could and Bill had managed to patch the canoe, they turned their faces toward home, in defeat, in sorrow, in an anguish over Larry.

Alan picked him up in his arms, gently and tenderly, trying to keep that fatal bleeding from starting afresh.

With Bill following him, staggering under the weight of canoe, guns and pack, he headed back toward the Alooska branch.

For an hour they stumbled along the muskrat runways, plowed through bog and mire, groped through the tall impeding flags. It was an hour of darkness, of blind heroic struggle. But they reached the Alooska branch at last and set the canoe to water; and making Larry a soft bed of flags, they began their sorrowful journey.

With no sleep in more than fifty hours, with all that long hard chase behind them, they were on the verge of exhaustion, and could make no time. Their hands were raw with blisters from paddle work; their faces were bleeding from insect bites; their whole bodies ached intolerably. They were muddied, wet, gaunt with hunger, heart-sick from the disgraceful failure of their patrol. But they refused to stop or rest; Larry had to be taken home quickly; the hours were a matter of life or death to him. With dogged courage they drove themselves on. Worst of all their troubles, Larry would sink at times into a lifeless coma that scared them, and at times tossed wildly and sat up and fought at them in his pain-racked delirium.

There was no sun that morning. A dismal pall of clouds driving out of the northwest drenched them again and again with icy showers. The hours dragged endlessly. A straight reach of a hundred yards seemed like weary leagues.

With his spirits at so low an ebb, the picture of that fur pack in Dave MacMillan's shed rose before Alan's eyes, and he foresaw the inevitable consequences to flow from that discovery. In his exhaustion, with all the buoyancy of hope drained out of him, he no longer could feel that somehow he was going to get Joyce's

father off lightly. He must take Dave in to Endurance and enter charge; and now, with these bandits escaped, Dave would bear the whole brunt of the law's retribution. He felt that all the rest of his life he would be haunted by the memory of Joyce's pale face, frightened and anguished, in the cold gray dawn of yesterday.

In this whole miserable business—Jimmy Montgomery dead, Larry in the shadow of death, that tragedy hovering over innocent Joyce MacMillan, the bandits escaped and the patrol disgraced—in all this evil-starred affair, only one thought held any comfort for Alan. It was a vengeful thought, born of a savage and vengeful mood. He held a sword now over Inspector Haskell. Haskell had ordered this patrol to be split. Out of his ignorance and jealous anger, he had issued that crazy order, and it had wrecked the patrol. His gross incompetence, which heretofore had been only a vague charge hard to prove, now stood out glaringly, in all its inescapable guilt.

Alan swore to wield this sword in his hand. . . . "I'll not pussyfoot with him now. He'll walk the chalk line, he'll listen to what I've got to say, or I'll bring on an investigation and smoke him out. He'll not cause any more of my men to get shot up. Men like Bill and Larry and Frank aren't going to pay the price of his incompetence and personal grudges. I'll tell him what I want done, and I'll cram it down his throat. His political pull can't get him free of this. I've got the goods on him."

By mid-afternoon of that interminable day they came to the first straggling trees at the Thal-Azzah edge. At deep twilight they reached the Alooska Forks and the anchored launch.

Pedneault had just returned from his useless trip

up the south branch. In a few words he understood all that had happened. With one glance at his spent and staggering partners, he took their heavy burden from their shoulders.

Alan roused himself from his numbed exhaustion long enough to do one last merciful thing. In the medicine chest of the launch he found hypodermic needle and drugs for Larry—codeine to still that agonizing pain, strychnine to keep that weak heart beating.

When he had administered them he watched till Larry ceased his delirious tossing and sank into unconsciousness. Then he flung himself down beside Bill, driven to the limit of human endurance. His last waking thought was the grim satisfaction of knowing that he held a sword over his guilty arrogant officer and could bring him to account at last.

In his cabin Inspector Haskell sat behind his desk, waiting for Alan Baker to come in and report. He was thinking, thinking hard; and for all his self-control his nerves were jumpy. His fingers twitched as he tried to light a monogrammed cigarette, and he glanced nervously at the doorway through which his Nemesis would presently come striding.

Over in a corner Whipple sat at the table, pretending to write but in reality waiting there, as Haskell had bidden him. Outside it was twilight, gloomy and chill. A pall of clouds shut out the midnight sun-glow, and a grayish mist was creeping up the terrace from the Mackenzie.

Something cold had gripped Haskell half an hour ago when he saw the patrol returning without the six bandits and with Constable Younge desperately wounded. He knew the details of that patrol already; Whipple had come up and privately told him. How

the bandits had headed for the Thal-Azzah, as Baker had warned. How Baker had run those six to earth and cornered them. How Pedneault and the other two constables had been a hundred and forty miles away during that crucial hour.

As he knew, this crime was the most spectacular in years along the Three Rivers. The defeat administered to the Police was the most stinging in a decade. This incident would have reverberations at headquarters. Superintendent Williamson would investigate. The very first question of that veteran old officer would be:

"Why in hell did you order Baker to divide that patrol? Splitting up his detail that way—didn't you realize that neither party would be able to handle those criminals?"

Not deluding himself, Haskell knew he was caught. He knew he had made a capital mistake in a Force where a man's first mistake is usually his last. In these thirty minutes all his prospects of promotion in service, of smashing Alan Baker, of swinging Elizabeth Spaulding to himself, had come tumbling down like a house of cards, and he was thoroughly frightened.

Face to face with a quick and inglorious exit from the Force, he realized now how keenly he wanted to stay with the Mounted and achieve a career in it. It was his ambition to be known as a "northern man," an officer of distinction, and to have his name mentioned in the same breath with men like Dempster, LaNauze, Joy and Alan Baker. And there was a subtler and more profound reason for his wishing to stay in service here in the North: his idle, pleasure-seeking life of former years had palled on him; he had seen himself drifting into the unpurposive, flabby existence and early decay of a remittance man. This North country, clean and cold and virile as its winds and snow, had braced him

and taught him the human necessity of work and a goal.

It would spell *finis* to his career if the facts of the patrol became known. The blame of this shameful defeat lay squarely at his door. Baker surely realized that; Baker surely was going to use that sword against him. It was war now, open and avowed war between them.

As he pondered his ugly situation, desperately trying to see a way out, Haskell swore it would not be himself who lost. He knew he had the jump on Baker in cleverness; and the fact that he was a commissioned officer in command gave him a tremendous advantage.

Step by step, logic led him to the one and only recourse he had. If Williamson ever found out he had ordered that patrol split, he was sunk. Therefore Williamson *must not find out*. There was a way to keep him from knowing the facts.

Haskell hesitated a little over so dishonorable a measure. It would carry him a little deeper into intrigue and perfidy than he wished to go. But this was a battle to the hilt. Either he or Baker was going down and out. If he let some silly scruples stop him, it meant his doom.

He tried to still his conscience by thinking that Baker had wanted the patrol to fail. If that was so, then this measure was exactly what the sergeant had coming to him. He ought to be smashed, and smashed hard. . . . You've got to fight fire with fire. . . .

Still in his muddied and torn uniform, Alan came down the slope toward Haskell's cabin, intending to bludgeon some hard and fast terms out of the guilty inspector or shoot a complaint over his head to Superintendent Williamson. If Haskell did not give in to his

demands, he meant to send a half-breed runner to the Royal Signal Corps station at Resolution and flash a message to the division commander that would start an avalanche.

Over at Mrs. Drummond's house where Joyce had gone, candles were gleaming in the windows. Across at Father Claverly's tiny hospital, Larry Younge lay fighting for his life. Up the slope at barracks Dave MacMillan was locked in the Police "butter-tub," charged with being accomplice to robbery and murder.

Alan's ears still rang with the savage words that Joyce's father had lashed him with. And he was thinking chiefly of Dave, as he went down the slope. Twelve hours ago, when he stepped ashore at the trading post and met the trader, he had been astonished at the change in Dave. The man had got a new grip on himself; he had straightened up; Joyce had visibly reclaimed him. With his own eyes Alan had seen Dave's stupefied bewilderment when confronted with the pack of furs, and his savage fighting anger when he was arrested. That reaction was the unmistakable fiery anger of a man entirely innocent—and savage because of his innocence.

Furthermore Joyce had reported secretly: "Alan, I talked with him, as you asked me to. *He isn't guilty!* He never had heard a whisper about these bandits, till I told him. He couldn't have deceived *me!*"

That same impression had been Alan's—"He couldn't have deceived me." His beliefs were based upon intangible things, but to him they outweighed all the damning material evidence stacked against the trader. There was something behind that pack of furs which hadn't come to light yet and which would explain those damning circumstances.

It was his conviction that *Dave MacMillan was not guilty at all.*

He meant to put up a fight for Dave. It was easy to resolve that, but the actual job was the hardest thing he had attempted in his whole life. The only way under heaven of clearing Dave was to capture the guilty men and either wring a confession out of them or hold out King's evidence as a lure and get them started talking against each other.

Out of his man-hunting experience and his knowledge of this huge region, he had built a new plan to get those men. They were safe now in the Thal-Azzah; they could never be ferreted out of that amphibious wilderness. They would certainly stay there till the heavy spring rains were over and the hunt had died down. Besides, the flies in that country made traveling next to impossible. But in three weeks or a month, the rains would stop and the flies would abate. Those men would be on the move then.

Which way would they try to escape? They knew better than to come back west and show up along the Mackenzie. They wouldn't go north to the Arctic coast; they'd have no ship to get away on, and the Mounted had patrols there. They wouldn't go south through Chipewyan territory; the Indians would give them away, and Police posts were sprinkled plentifully through the Great Slave and Athabasca country. They certainly knew that, those men did.

They'd go *east* when they left the Thal-Azzah. They'd go across the Great Barrens to Hudson's Bay and try to pick up passage on a fishing smack, or go east and south toward The Pas in Manitoba. There was only one route leading east out of the Thal-Azzah, and they'd have to take it. It was an old Tinneh trade-route, the Inconnu River.

Alan meant to lead a patrol to the Inconnu.

As he strode into the cabin, he saw Haskell waiting for him, coolly smoking a cigarette. It seemed to Alan that the men actually did not realize that his ignorant orders had wrecked the patrol and that the whole blame and shame of it lay at his door.

When he finished his report, Haskell made no comment. Wondering at his cool air, Alan was silent a few moments. He could not understand the man's nonchalance. This was war between them; each knew it; and yet Haskell showed no fear, no concern, no conciliatory spirit whatsoever.

Keeping back his heavy weapon, Alan took up his defense of Joyce's father:

"About Dave MacMillan. My opinion is, he's entirely innocent. There's no call to send him outside to Edmonton. A traveling court is coming down the Three Rivers in August, and his case can wait for that. He can be kept here, or released on bail. Drummond will put up bail; I'll be personally responsible for him. There's another reason: he's got some good friends among the Dogribs; if he's released he'll get busy and stir them up to help hunt those bandits——"

Haskell interposed: "There's no bail for a man charged with murder."

"This is an accessory charge. There is a bail for that."

"What was he doing last week? Where was he? Can he put up any alibi?"

"He was in the Candle-Ice Lake country, trying to locate Little Otter's band. He'd fed them all winter, and they owed him their spring peltry; but they'd sneaked away and taken their peltry in to the L. & H. He saw no one; he has no alibi."

"Pretty flimsy—a week without seeing a single person!"

"A week?—You can travel a month in that country without seeing anybody!"

"That trader won't be released," Haskell said flatly. "*I'll* decide whether to keep him here or send him outside to Edmonton."

Alan saw the inspector's motive. In a crime of this size Haskell had to make at least some showing. If no one was caught, no one punished, headquarters would be flashing some hot radiograms at him. But if he could report that he had captured the ringleader, headquarters would give him time. Other detachments would take up the hunt; he would save his skin. So he intended to make a scapegoat out of Dave MacMillan. The guilt or innocence of a fellowman mattered not at all with him; his own interests came first.

Dismissing Dave MacMillan's plight with a curt gesture, Haskell demanded: "What made you leave Constable Burgoon there at the trading post, shorthanded as we are?"

"To watch after the furs and trade goods."

"That's MacMillan's lookout. I'll have to instruct Pedneault to get Burgoon tomorrow."

"But Miss Joyce expects to return there. She has good reasons. What protection do you intend to give her?"

"If she insists on returning, I don't feel any responsibility. This isn't an orphanage; it's a Mounted Police post."

Alan entered that remark in his account against the inspector. Haskell's callous attitude toward a defenseless, grief-stricken girl seemed to him an index to the man's real manhood. He himself could not look after

Joyce's safety; within forty-eight hours he would be leaving Fort Endurance on the Inconnu patrol, and that might keep him away two months.

There was a note of personal animus in Haskell's mention of Joyce, and Alan knew the source of it. Hunting caribou up the Alooska last fall, Haskell had stopped at the trading post over night. Because Joyce was living there in that sub-Arctic isolation, he had made the sorry mistake of thinking she was an innocent young creature easily dazzled by his rank and gold braid and city polish. . . . Alan often had thought, "If I know anything about Joyce, she *slapped* that delusion out of him!"

Still keeping his sword hidden from Haskell, he broached the matter of that patrol to the Inconnu. As he sketched his plan briefly, he saw that Haskell, listening to him coldly, was not even interested. An uneasiness came over him. What was Haskell thinking? Didn't the man realize he had made a fatal mistake? How could be sit there so cool, with that sardonic smile on his face?

Alan summed up his plan: "In three weeks I want to have a patrol lying low on the Inconnu. I'll take Hardsock and Pedneault, and enlist three good 'breeds as special constables——"

Haskell stopped him.

"I'm not interested in your plan, sergeant. You're merely making a long guess about what they'll do. It sounds thin——"

"About as thin as my guess that they'd take the north branch into the Thal-Azzah!" Alan flung back at him. "I know this country. I know what I'm talking about. Now get this straight, inspector: I'm going to make that trip. I didn't come in here to ask your per-

mission. You've wrecked one patrol. If Superintendent Williamson hears about that, you won't have a chance to wreck any more. You'll keep Dave MacMillan here, you'll keep your hands off this Inconnu trip, or Williamson is going to hear damned quick!"

The threat daunted Haskell not at all. He scarcely seemed to have heard. With that faint sardonic smile on his face, he intoned coldly:

"Besides the flimsiness of your plan, sergeant, there's another absurdity about it. You just came back from a patrol that started out with every chance in the world of succeeding. You yourself admit you met the bandits and even had them cornered. But by your weak vacillating fight you allowed them to escape——"

"What's that?" Alan cut in. "A weak vacillating fight? . . . Good Lord!" His memory whipped back to Bill and himself bellying up behind the muskrat house, and to Larry Younge coming out against six men on open water.

"You failed dismally," Haskell proceeded, in knife-edge voice. "You probably *wanted* to fail, so you could try to hang something onto me. Those criminals escaped clean, and one of your men was badly shot. After such a performance, don't you think it's a bit ridiculous of you to stand there and baldly ask me to let you lead a thousand-mile, all-summer patrol with five men? Instead . . . Well, you've been in the Mounted long enough to know what the consequences are of a failure like yours."

Alan stood dazed. Haskell was actually blaming that disaster upon him! Did the man still fail to realize that the patrol had been wrecked by his own crazy orders?

"Consequences?" he repeated. "Consequences for *me?* I warned you we shouldn't split our party. That

was the cause of us failing. I predicted just what happened."

Haskell brushed the words aside. "The consequences of a blundering, botched-up patrol such as you led are usually demotion to the ranks. That's what you'll have to take. In an important matter like this I haven't any choice but to make you a constable. Whipple, write out the papers for this demotion."

For moments Alan stared at him. Then he laughed. It was incredible, a travesty. Busted! Busted because of this man's orders. Busted because he had been sent out, tied hand and foot, on a patrol doomed to disaster before it started.

He snapped: "You can quit that scratching, Whipple; I'm not a constable yet. And you, inspector, if you haven't got sense enough to know you're hanging on to your command by a couple fingers, I'll tell you about it. When Williamson finds out about you ordering me to split my party, he'll either ask for your resignation or fan you down to the Border where you belong. You've had the whip-hand all along, but now I've got it. You're going to give Dave MacMillan a decent chance, and I'm going to make that patrol to the Inconnu."

Across the desk Haskell surveyed him coldly. "Just a moment, Baker. You said something about my ordering you to split your party. You're blaming me for your failure." He met Alan's eyes without a tremor; he was able to look steadily at Alan, as he added: "I didn't order you to split your detail. I may have suggested it, but that patrol was yours, and you're not going to hang the blame on——"

"You didn't order me to? You say you didn't order me?"

Dumfounded he stared at the inspector.

"That's exactly what I said, sergeant. I gave you no such orders."

Speechless for moments, Alan finally found words. "You're a liar. A sneaking liar! You're trying to crawl out——"

Haskell jerked around to Whipple. "Make a note of that remark." He turned to Alan again, and in hard tones, with no hesitation or weakness, he said: "You came in here thinking you had some heavy artillery against me. You meant to *get* me. Whether I gave orders or merely suggested, isn't the question now, sergeant. The question is: How are you going to *prove* your charge? Do you happen to possess any documentary evidence, or can you produce any witnesses, that I gave you that order? You can't! Hardsock and Younge were down at the wharf. On the other hand Constable Whipple here was present and heard what you said. So it is the word of two people against yours, and one of them your Officer Commanding. *What do you think of your heavy artillery now?*"

He smiled sardonically, in triumph. Alan stood mute, thunderstruck. A moment ago he had thought that Haskell had actually forgotten those crazy orders. But now, with the meaning of those words dawning upon him, he realized that Haskell had deliberately planned this perfidy. By a brazen, incredibly brazen lie, he intended to squirm out of any and all responsibility for the wrecked patrol.

The very effrontery of the denial staggered Alan. In a dazed manner he sought to find a way out of what Haskell had just said. But after a little space it was borne in upon him that Haskell had beaten him; that he no longer held a sword over the inspector; that his own heavy weapon was turned against himself now.

Whipple *had* been here; his own men *had* been down at the wharf. In sickened despair he felt his situation like the fanged jaws of a trap pinioning him.

For perhaps a minute he stood there speechless, staring into the cold taunting eyes of his enemy. It was a tribute to his good sense that he recognized he was helpless. His face was pale, his arms hung limply at his side. He made no defense, put up no battle. It was all useless.

Presently he was able to say, throatily: "I hadn't thought of that, inspector. I knew you were tricky, but still I thought you were too near being a man for a thing like that. I've been associating with men like Larry and Bill and Ped for so long that I'd forgotten your kind exists. A lie, a damnable bare-faced lie, from an officer—in that uniform . . . Good God! If you hadn't said it, I wouldn't have believed."

"Is that all, *constable?*" Haskell inquired, with a faint sneer on his mouth.

"Yes, that's all. You've got me."

He turned and trudged out the door.

CHAPTER IX: THE HONOR TRAIL

AIMLESSLY Alan went up the twilight slope, still dazed by his clash with Haskell.

Without wording the thought consciously, he was aware that something cataclysmic had just happened to him. Tonight he had come to a parting of the ways in his life.

He did not enter his cabin. Walls held a sense of imprisonment for him; he wanted to be under the open skies. A little distance from the cabin door he stopped and leaned against a boulder, a massive granite rock, that seemed to him like a solid, earth-rooted friend.

His thoughts were all a confused turmoil. Busted —a constable—saddled with the whole blame of that disgraceful patrol—the ground cut out from under him by that brazen lie! Now he realized to the full how unscrupulous Haskell could be in a show-down fight. When reputation and Elizabeth Spaulding and command here were at stake, Haskell was as cunning as a slinker wolf and as malign as a carcajou. The inspector had been out to get him, and had got him. He stood on a level now with Whipple and Burgoon—he, once the proud leader of a proud detachment.

A grayish-white mist was beginning to roll up from the cold Mackenzie waters. Far-away across the river his beloved wilderness of hills was faintly visible, vague masses uplifting their peaks to the sky. Over at timber edge a night wind crooned through the pines in a song of elemental sadness. Chill and delicious, the

wind refreshed him and ran like cool fingers over his tired aching body.

In the vision of imagination he was looking four hundred miles away to the heart of the Thal-Azzah, seeing those six bandits camped there on some dry islet, their canoes drawn up, a sentinel alert; and he saw himself with his hard-bitten northern men slipping upon them through the tall flags. So hauntingly clear, so impossible a picture, it was a torture, and he forced his mind away from it.

One fact came home to him, hard and inexorable: his Inconnu trip was smashed. To make that patrol he had to have Haskell's backing. But to hope for any coöperation from the inspector would be a fool's wishful thinking. Haskell was out to get *him,* not those criminals. A man of selfish and narrow soul, Haskell was not lifting his eyes above this personal feud between them. That Inconnu plan was dead.

Motionless there in the semi-dark, with the mist creeping up and up till it enveloped him and blotted out his cabin a few paces distant, Alan felt the terrible hopelessness of his situation. He was bound hand and foot. There was nothing on earth he could do—nothing except forget the aching vision of running those six unknown murderers to earth.

Did he dare forget? . . . Dimly through the creeping mist he saw the candle light of the tiny hospital where Larry, his able silent comrade on many a patrol, lay tossing in pain and fever; where Larry, so strong of body, so proud of his physical powers, was facing the black realization that he would never again go out on patrol with other men, and would never again follow a Strong-Woods trail. Jutting out from the barracks he could see the massive outlines of the cement cell where Dave MacMillan, helpless to prove his in-

nocence, awaited the full vengeance of the law. He felt a responsibility toward Dave MacMillan, all aside from Dave being Joyce's father. If it had been his duty to arrest MacMillan and bring him in, it was a higher duty now to fight for him, to clear a man whom he knew in his heart to be innocent.

On above the cabin, at a little distance from the towering pine that marked Curt Spaulding's grave, the fresh-hewn lobstick of Jimmy Montgomery was limned against the sky. The intangible chains of honor, of honor to a partner dead and a wounded comrade in the shadow of death, bound him to retribution. He dared not forget.

Thinking in hard practical terms, Alan saw that so long as Haskell had power over him, he could not stir a hand. If he was ever to get those criminals, he had to be free. Several paths lay open to him. One by one he studied and rejected them, till only the last remained.

For minutes he weighed that possible act. Its cost to him was a terrible cost. It would wipe out his brilliant reputation, his whole Police record. It would kill his last chance of ever bringing Haskell to account. It would up-root him and take him for good and all out of this North country.

Torn by doubt and indecision, he wavered. The price seemed too staggering.

Presently he heard someone come up the terrace and glide past him and go on toward his cabin. The figure was merely a moving blur in the mist, but Alan recognized that light footstep.

He called softly: "Joyce! You wanted to see me?"

At his voice she turned and came toward the boulder, coming out of the mist like a slender girlish apparition.

"Alan! I've been wondering where you . . . Your cabin was all dark, and I couldn't find you. Those things Dad said—you didn't mind them, Alan?"

"Why no, Joyce. I hardly blame him. Don't you feel bad about that."

He noticed how exhausted she was after the strain of these last three days, and he suggested: "Let's sit down, Joyce. I've got something to tell you, and we've a couple things to talk over."

He spread his jacket on the damp grass for her, and sat down facing her in the misty purple darkness.

In eager hope she asked him: "Alan, what did Haskell say about Dad? He's going to release Dad on bail, as you thought?"

Alan shook his head, sorry for her, sorry for all the heartache that lay ahead for her now. "No, Haskell wouldn't listen to releasing him. Don't hope for that, Joyce."

"But Dad will stay here? He'll be kept here till the court comes down in August?"

Alan winced. It seemed he was fated to tell Joyce nothing but evil news.

"Joyce, Haskell can be brutal and inhuman. He wouldn't consent even to letting your dad remain here. He intends to send him outside to Edmonton."

It was on his lips to add, "Your father is being sacrificed to Haskell's need of a victim." But he could not bring himself to tell Joyce that. The news had stricken her cruelly enough. In the dim half-light he saw a shudder sweep through her, saw her dash tears from her eyes.

If only she could be near her father, if only she could visit him, the ordeal might be lightened for her. The lonely waiting weeks of suspense would be agony,

if her father was a thousand miles away, among strangers, with no one to lift a hand for him.

He offered gently: "Joyce, if you want to go along and be near him, I'll pay—I'll see to it that you can. It'd be best for you, and for him too, if you would."

Joyce did not answer at once. As he looked down at her, Alan was struck by the sense of how young and innocent a girl Joyce was; and with bitter self-reproach he remembered those long months of the winter past when he had left her alone to her battle, because Elizabeth, protected, sheltered, kept in ease here at Endurance, had demanded it of him. Before this hour he had always thought of Joyce as a girl so spirited and independent that she did not need a man's help. But now, sitting beside her there in the mist, he realized that in her desperate plight she needed his strength and protection far more than Elizabeth did. Except for him Joyce was alone in the world, without friends, relatives, money, and with her father in the shadow of the gallows.

Presently, with the spirited courage he had always loved in her, Joyce asserted:

"Alan, I'm going back home. The Dogribs are bringing in their furs next week. I'll send several of their men *en derouine* to the Hares and Loucheux and get their furs too. I'll sacrifice all our trade goods and raise money for Dad's defense. It'll be a true way of fighting for Dad if I go back home."

"But you mustn't be alone there, Joyce, with those river 'breeds knowing your father is out of the country. Haskell refuses to give you any protection whatsoever."

"I don't mind being alone. I can take care of myself. It'll be lonesome, but all the time I'll be knowing that

I'm doing the right thing and being a real help to Dad."

Alan acquiesced reluctantly, against his better judgment. A slender girl like her, scarcely out of her 'teens, going back to that isolated post. . . . A white girl, winsome, pretty, of lissome body, alone there, with Indians coming and going, with half-breeds coming and going. . . . He dared not let her jeopardize herself; he must make some arrangement to protect her. It would not take long for those river 'breeds to discover that a different hand was ruling at Endurance.

Joyce asked him: "What happened between you and Haskell, Alan? You said you could force him to let you manage this whole case, but he seems to've been high-handed."

Briefly Alan told her what had taken place down there in the cabin.

His account left Joyce speechless, in a silent fury, her little fists clenched, her lips parted in astonishment.

"But he can't demote you, Alan!" she cried. "He can't blame *you* for *his* mistake."

"He can't? He's already done it! If I try to fight him, if I make the slightest insubordinate move, he's actually got the power to jail me!"

"But the Inconnu patrol—he'll let you go on that, Alan?"

"And capture those men and get the credit? Not Haskell! He's too wise. Getting those bandits comes second with him. So long as he saves his face, he doesn't really care whether he gets them or not. That Inconnu patrol is dead. It was our best hope, but now it can't ever be. I could stir up trouble for him, I could bring on an investigation; but that would take months. It'd be too late then; those bandits'll be gone."

She repeated, brokenly: "Gone, gone—yes, it'll be too late then. Alan, that means—means Dad will be found guilty—and sent to prison—or worse. . . ."

For the second time in the years he had known her, Joyce broke down and cried. It hurt Alan as few things in his life had ever done. Tenderly he put his arm around her shoulders, and pleaded: "Joyce, please don't. It hasn't happened yet. We've got time—a couple months—to do something. I'm going to see you through this, Joyce."

As he felt her sobbing against him, as he thought of this tragedy looming over her, his last hesitancy about his plan was swept away. With those bandits safe in the watery wilderness of the Thal-Azzah, Dave MacMillan would be convicted; he would be sent up for life. It would break Joyce, break her spirited courage, her wild-born nature. When he thought of the terrible stigma upon a girl so innocent and brave, he swore silently:

"I'll never see her brought down to that. I'll get those men, I'll bring the truth into court."

He realized fully that he was starting on a long trail, a trail never to be retraced. He was committing himself to a staggering self-sacrifice. But he had to traverse that path; in honor he could do nothing else.

He rose abruptly, brushing away his last trace of hesitancy; and gave Joyce his hand to rise.

"Joyce, there's something I've got to do now. I've got to go. You mustn't stay here. Come." He took her arm, and as they went down the slope, he asked: "I want to see you again before I—some final arrangements with you. . . . Won't you be down at the wharf in half an hour?"

Wondering at his odd tones, his stern purposive manner, Joyce promised him.

At Mrs. Drummond's house he left her and started out along the terrace to Haskell's cabin.

Across the desk he demanded, with no preliminaries:

"I want to buy out."

Haskell watched him uneasily. He had been startled when Alan strode into the cabin so hard of face; and his hand had closed over a heavy paper-weight. He wanted no fight with this powerful sergeant who was in the habit of cleaning up Indian camps by himself.

"To buy out?" he echoed. "You want to buy out of the Mounted?"

"That's what I mean. And tonight! Here! Now!"

Haskell's eyes narrowed in suspicion. He could hardly believe it. He knew how deeply Baker was rooted in his work and friendships and life in this northern country; and he could scarcely conceive of a man deliberately throwing away a long brilliant Police record at one irremediable step.

But there was no doubting Baker's words, no doubting his grim manner. Baker was demanding to buy out —to get out for good. As he studied the sergeant, Haskell drew back warily. Baker might be laying some trap for him.

He refused, "I'm too short-handed here as it is now."

"I don't give a whisky-damn about that. I'm buying out."

Haskell's confidence was returning as he saw that Alan intended no physical violence. He objected, "But I don't want you to buy out."

"What you want doesn't cut any ice. I know you don't want me to. You were expecting to ride me.

You've been smacking your lips over that ever since you busted me."

"If you buy out, your record ends. You'll have to start all over."

"I'm buying out *for good.* There'll be no starting over again. I'm getting out of the Mounted, out of the country!"

Haskell debated swiftly. He was not averse to Baker cutting his own head off; and he saw now there was no trap laid for him. But there were other things to be considered. His sober judgment, casting back over the last nine months, recalled the score of times Baker had corrected bad mistakes of his and kept the post running smoothly. Wisdom whispered to him that he needed the man, needed him desperately. And Elizabeth Spaulding . . . Was she going away with Baker? Was Baker taking her with him?

If she went, his act in busting the sergeant would prove a boomerang against himself.

Uncertain, fearful of Elizabeth leaving, he tried to temporize.

"I think you're being hasty, sergeant. You'll regret this a hundred times. You ought to realize your demotion is only for the time being and I intend to put you back——"

Alan nailed him: "You're having some second thoughts. I'm not hasty; I've stood nine months of this. I'm buying out."

"I haven't the authority to let you. You'll have to make out application and wait for permission from headquarters."

"That's the rule for close-in detachments. Down north here where a communication would take several months, it's understood that an officer can accept a buy-out on his own recognizance."

"But it's not the official rule. Under the circumstances I don't choose to accept your papers."

"You will choose! I'll make you choose! You've busted me, all right; you've saddled the blame and shame of that patrol on me; you've mouthed your lie and you've got a stool pigeon there to back you up. But I can bring on an investigation just the same. There's things happened last winter that you can't lie out of. Williamson is coming down here next month. He hasn't got any too much use for you now. If I'm here when he comes, what I'll tell him won't help your standing much."

Haskell lit a cigarette to hide his nervousness. He knew the score of incidents last winter that Baker was referring to. Compared with this last patrol, they were little things, but little things could start an avalanche.

He asked, "Where are you going if you get out of service?"

"That'll not be your affair, thank God! I'm leaving here. Tonight. That's all you need to know."

Haskell started a little. Tonight—no boat coming past—it meant Baker was going by himself! Meant Elizabeth would not go with him but would stay here at Endurance!

Very thoughtful, he looked away, debating. Baker's motives, his reasons for this precipitate move, were dark and puzzling. But he saw no way in which they could possibly harm him. Hardsock, an experienced northern man, would still be available, a reliable veteran to turn to, especially if baited by the hope of this vacated sergeancy. Hardsock would be easier to manage, too. Since Elizabeth was going to stay here, at least temporarily, why shouldn't he let Baker go? The farther away he was, the better!

The more he studied the situation, the more it seemed too good to be true that Baker was deliberately cutting his head off, buying out, getting out of the country, leaving Elizabeth here alone, killing any possibility of the investigation that he secretly dreaded.

Presently he turned around again.

"I'll consent on one condition to your buying out. Otherwise you'll have to wait for official and regular approval."

"What's the condition?"

"There seems," Haskell said steadily, with the ability to look Alan squarely in the eyes, "to be a difference of opinion between us about the responsibility of this Alooska patrol. If you'll sign a statement to the effect that you had complete charge of the detail and split your party on your own initiative—if you'll do that, you can buy out. Otherwise you can't."

Alan wavered. Signing a brazen lie, taking all the stinging disgrace upon himself, strengthening Haskell's guilty hand . . . But then his thoughts leaped to Jimmy and Larry and Dave MacMillan, and to Joyce as she came to him out of the night mist, pinning her last hope to him. What did it matter, his signing a lie? Would it change one jot or tittle of God's truth? What did a rag of paper matter as weighed against his plan, his ache to be off on his long free-flung hunt for those murderers, avenging his partners, shielding Joyce?

He said: "I'll sign. Load it as heavy as you like. But don't knock Hardsock or Pedneault or Younge."

Haskell wrote out the declaration of responsibility. Alan read it. As he wrote his name, he sneered:

"If I were you, I'd frame that, inspector, and hang it on the wall. It's a certificate of your dishonor."

Not answering, Haskell went on looking up the remaining enlistment period and figuring the amount.

Whipple brought over the forms and filled in the data. Both Alan and Haskell, with the constable as witness, signed the numerous official sheets of the procedure.

Folding his copy of it, Alan walked out of the door, out of service, out of the Mounted Police.

CHAPTER X: KLAHOWYA

In his cabin Alan took off his uniform and changed to civilian clothes.

It seemed to him he was stripping off his foot-free adventuresome life with that uniform.

On the bed he laid out his broken rifle, his service revolver and all other government property, where Bill could get it and check it in for him. Several personal belongings—letters, documents, and especially the dozen-odd presents Joyce had given him—he placed in a trunk for safe keeping. What money he had on hand, several hundred dollars, he buttoned carefully in his shirt pocket. His expenses on this trip ahead would be heavy; he would have to borrow. But he was going to take that Victoria job, and he knew Colonel Steele would gladly give him a salary advance.

Then he made up a slender pack—a single blanket, a change of clothes, food for a week or ten days. That was all. No camping outfit, no weapons, no equipment for wilderness travel.

He hurried through these preparations. He wanted to be away from here before dawn, before the sun stood mellow and warm on the shimmering pine hills. He was glad that the mist and gloomy twilight hid all sight of his beloved ranges around Endurance. If only he could slip away at night, he would not feel the hurt so bitterly.

In some measure he was buoyed up by the feeling of being free, free of Haskell, free of all restraint,

free to attempt his lone-handed venture. He was eager to be gone; the trail of danger beckoned him with its old irresistible lure. He saw his plan only in general outline as yet, but that did not matter now. In the lonely days and weeks ahead he would have plenty of time to think out the details of it.

As he was buckling his pack together, Elizabeth unexpectedly came into the cabin. When she stepped nearer, into the candle glow, Alan saw by her expression that she had heard about his run-in with Haskell.

He had been on the point of writing her a note and leaving it with Bill, for he did not especially care to see her before he left. If she found out his purpose of these next few weeks, she would probably oppose it. He could not and would not yield to her now.

As she stepped into the light, she exclaimed: "Alan! That MacMillan girl told Mrs. Drummond that Haskell demoted you! That you're a constable! That he put all the blame of this patrol on you!"

"That's what he did," Alan answered, straightening up, facing her. "I didn't believe he was capable of it. But I shouldn't have been surprised; he's given me cues enough to his nature."

"And you're going to stand for that?" Her voice rose, sharp, nagging. "You're going to be his orderly, a constable, disgraced, bossed around? I'd think that any *man* would—would——"

She checked herself as she saw the government property laid out on the bed and noticed that Alan was in civilian clothes.

He said quietly: "You were a bit hasty. I *didn't* stand for it. I bought out."

"Bought out——?"

"I'm out of the Mounted. Out for good!"

Elizabeth gasped. For moments she stared at him,

incredulous. She would not have believed; but his tones, the granite-hard expression of his features, made her realize he was telling her the truth. During all the winter past she had plotted, argued, threatened, to make him leave service. Now, with an unexpectedness that dazed her, he *was* out!

She did not know just why he had taken this drastic step, but vaguely she guessed he had had some fierce clash with Haskell. It did not matter, the circumstances. He was free of this ninety-a-month rut, this backwoods calling. There had always been a doubt in her mind whether Alan, when the great test came, would actually tear himself away from the Mounted. She had expected a fight that would embitter him against her. But now he was out; he would surely take that Victoria offer; next winter she would be living in Victoria!

Her heart leaped at the thought, and her whole manner toward Alan changed. He was free now; she had not forced him; her great desire had come about with no cost to her. But she saw that Alan, sick at heart over his "freedom," was fighting down an anguish at leaving this country. She decided that it would be wise to make him forget their former arguments; wise to keep him from remembering she had ever demanded that he leave.

She drew near him, slipped an arm about him; and a softness came into her voice.

"Dear, you're sorry to be out. I'm sorry to see you so hurt. You didn't want to leave here, Alan. I—I did want you to; but I wouldn't have insisted. I'd have given in to you, dear, before I'd seen you unhappy. In the long run, we'll not regret; it'll be the best for us."

Alan watched the candle sheen in her hair, the auburn hair that always brought him poignant memories

of her brother Curt. His thoughts, leaping ahead to his lone-handed venture, were scarcely with her at all, yet he was bewildered by her sudden change, her ardent affection. There had been times when affection from her would have cheered and heartened him; but now her lips, inviting him, asking for his own, meant less than the pack lying at his feet.

She asked him: "And now—you're going to take —we'll be down in Victoria, now? Won't Colonel Steele be glad when he hears! Alan, he's one of the best friends you ever had. You'll write to him right away?"

"I suppose so. Yes, I'm going to take that job. Not much else to turn to."

She noticed how cold, how unmoved he was; and she went on, half-whispering:

"On our way outside, we can be married at Edmonton, and have that trip we planned to the Blackfoot Selkirks. And we'll have—we can afford to have now! —a cabin back in Vancouver Island; back in the mountains by ourselves, Alan."

He merely said, gesturing at the alcove: "I'm leaving Curt's keepsakes here. You'll watch after them, won't you?" And he added, "I'm leaving here tonight, Elizabeth."

"Leaving here? *Tonight?*" Her eyes went to the pack on the floor. Suddenly startled, she looked up at him again.

Alan saw the questions in her eyes: "Where are you going? What are you going to do? Why aren't you taking me with you?"

Feeling that he owed some explanation to the girl he was engaged to, he partly explained: "I'm pitching off on a trip, Elizabeth. By myself. I'm going after those men that shot up two of my friends. Haskell

blocked a patrol I wanted to make. To go after them I had to be free. I don't know how long it'll take me. Maybe three weeks, maybe six. I can't even say exactly what I'll be doing or where I'll be. I'd like for you to wait here."

Something in his manner stopped Elizabeth from questioning him. She knew he intended to marry her and take her to Victoria; but something told her that in this present hour it was not well to question or oppose Alan Baker.

She acquiesced: "I'll wait, dear. If you can't tell me, or don't care to, it doesn't matter. But you won't put yourself in danger, Alan? Won't you promise me that much?"

"I'll be safe enough. . . ." He was thinking of Joyce MacMillan, more than two hundred miles from Fort Endurance, back in the savage Alooska wilderness. He said dully: "When I'm through with this business, I'll send you a radiogram. We'll go over to Victoria then."

"I'll wait; I'll wait here for you. But, Alan, before you go . . ." She stood on tiptoe, reproaching him, begging, "Aren't you going to—to tell me good-bye?"

Alan bent and kissed her, as she invited. But he did it dispassionately, as a thing expected of him. He felt her breath on his cheek, her arm tightening around him, her body pressed against his. He was subtly but unmistakably aware of a certain willingness about her; she wanted him to linger; she would have stayed with him there in the cabin. . . . It surprised, it shocked him, after all these months when she had been so cold and passionless.

When she had gone, he buckled his pack and caught up his hat. As he started to snuff the two candles in the alcove, he heard a thumping footstep on the thresh-

old and turned to see Bill Hardsock. In a flash he guessed that Bill had been waiting outside, not wanting to come in while Elizabeth was there.

"Alan! Hell's blue blazes!" Bill was all but incoherent as he advanced across the cabin. "Say it isn't so! I heard . . . wasn't meaning to listen . . . Joyce told me part of't, and I just heard you tell 'Lizabeth. . . . He didn't bust you? He didn't dare! And blame you for splitting our patrol? You didn't buy out——"

"That's what I did, Bill. He busted me, blamed me. What's worse, he wouldn't let us make the Inconnu trip. I couldn't stand that. I'm out. Leaving Endurance. Right now."

He never forgot the moment that followed. Bill's face turned gray. His jaw dropped, he stood in stupefied shock, with a look of misery on his blunt, bulldog features.

"You're—leaving—us," he gulped. "You're—pitching away—for good. You always stood up for us men, against Haskell. You and me . . . pretty good partners. . . . Now you won't be here any more, Alan. . . ."

"Bill, shake yourself together and listen. I'm going after those bandits. There's several things you've got to do for me. One is, I want you to cut aside from patrols whenever you can and visit Joyce and see she's safe. Watch those Pelican Channel 'breeds. You and I know they're a dangerous lot. Warn 'em you'll arrest the first one you catch on the Alooska.

"Another thing. I'm giving you this cabin and what's in it, except for a little personal stuff that I'll get sometime or else send for. And you attend to turning in my issue stuff there on the bed.

"Then, there's one last thing you can do for me. Got any free time coming in the next couple weeks?"

"I don't know. Yes, must have three or four days —way we've been hitting the ball all winter."

"Two days will be enough. I need a little help on my plan; and you, here at Endurance, you can give me a hand. It's not much, but it'll mean a lot to me. I'll tell you what I've got in mind, so you'll understand."

In a few terse sentences that left Bill gasping and swearing at so staggering a scheme, Alan sketched his plan.

He demanded: "Now Bill, can I depend on you to give me that help? I'll be banking on it; I'll be in a hell of a hole if you don't do it."

Bill was angered at the mere suggestion that he might let a partner down. He swore by all the nether regions that he would carry out those instructions to the letter.

"And you'll keep quiet about this, Bill? Don't tell Ped, Elizabeth, Drummond, anybody. If it ever gets out, it'd wreck the whole idea, and I'd probably land in a penitentiary."

"I'll keep quiet as a dead dog. I won't breathe a word. But Alan, why in hell, way we've hung together, why can't I be in on your trick?" Eagerly he pleaded, "Let me go along, Alan."

"It'd mean desertion for you. Haskell would give you the limit. And you've got to watch after Joyce. My work is a one-man job anyway."

He reached out his hand. "Bill, this is our *Klahowya.*" He forced a smile and a jest to cover his own emotion. "I've seen lots of better-looking fellows than you, Bill, but never a man I'd rather have with me when we're bellying up behind a muskrat house or knocking hell out of a camp of drunken Smokies. We'll keep in touch, Bill. You write to me. Lord knows but

what you and I, sometime on ahead, might get together again."

They shook hands.

Alan hurried down the slope to the trading store. Factor Drummond had not gone to bed. The news of the patrol, of his old friend Dave MacMillan being arrested and faced with such overwhelming evidence of guilt, had upset him. With chair leaned back against the counter, he was futilely trying to read a month-old Edmonton *Bulletin.*

His chair came down as Alan entered and strode into the circle of light.

"What the devil, Alan?—civilian clothes!"

Alan was weary of people's astonishment. He wasted no time with explanations.

"Drummond, where's old Dad Pence? I saw him here when we got back this evening."

Drummond pointed behind the counter. Alan walked around, up the narrow aisle, and there found old Pence asleep on a pile of wolf-skins.

He had passed his three score and ten, old Dad Pence, at prospecting, trapping, water-dogging, what-not. He had made fortunes on Indian Creek and in the Cassiars before Alan was born, and guilelessly had lost them to men sharper than he. He had come down to the twilight of life penniless, homeless, childless, hungry with a great hunger for human company—a white-whiskered old waif who trapped back in the western hills in winter, brought in a few mangy furs each spring, and hung around the fort all summer just to be near somebody.

But old Dad Pence could still handle a rifle with the best of the youngsters; and a reputation for magic which he had acquired over in the Cassiars among the witch-killing Indians, still clung to him and put fear

into primitive hearts. Altogether he was the man for Alan's purpose, if only Joyce would not mother him too much and make his existence thereafter too desolate by contrast.

Shaking him wide enough awake to understand what was wanted of him, Alan explained. He was to go back to the Big Alooska with Joyce and watch after her. He was to keep in touch with Bill Hardsock. Bill would help him out if anything unforeseen should happen. Under no circumstances was he to wander off into the bush and leave Joyce alone.

Old Pence nodded. "I'll do it, b'y, jist as you say. I'll try not to fergit and wanner off in th' bush. I'll look arter Joyce, you don't worry."

Alan thrust a handful of bills into his pocket, and rose up and stepped back around the counter.

Mrs. Drummond had heard his voice. With a shawl about her shoulders she had come out into the store, to hear more concerning all these strange happenings tonight.

Alan said to her: "Elizabeth will be with you a few weeks longer, Mrs. Drummond. It was mighty kind of you to have her with you since Curt died. When I send for her or come for her, I'll square with you for what I owe."

"Why, don't you think of that, Alan." She too was looking at his civilian clothes, his pack. "Are you going away?"

He nodded.

"What do you want me to do about Jimmy's little girl? I'm to take care of her till I hear from you? I mean, I'll be glad to, Alan; she's a sweet little thing." In the significant tone of a woman with a grudge Mrs. Drummond added: "She's no trouble at all for *me* to look after."

"For *you?*" Alan frowned. "Why—why I told Ashmun to give her to Elizabeth."

"That's what he did. But Elizabeth refused to. . . . I guess she just doesn't want to be bothered."

Alan merely said "Oh!" in surprise; but Mrs. Drummond knew he was keenly ashamed that the girl he was going to marry had heartlessly refused to care for the child of his dead partner.

He turned to the factor. "I want to buy your motor-canoe, Drummond. How much?"

"To buy it? You making a trip? Go ahead, take it and use it, Alan."

"But I'm not bringing it back. I'm leaving this country in it. How much?"

Drummond was all tangled in Alan's swift words. "That canoe isn't worth a lot. . . . You're leaving this country. . . . The motor cost me a hundred but it's three years old. . . . You're not bringing it back? . . . I guess fifty dollars, Alan. But what in the name of sin——?"

Alan gave him the fifty and strode out the door.

Down the terrace at the steamer landing, Joyce was waiting for him, as he had asked her. Laying his pack in Drummond's canoe and untying the painter, Alan stood holding it, hat in hand, for a few last words with Joyce.

He tried to tell himself that these moments here in the cold dawn were not his farewell to Joyce; that he would see her again, under happier auspices, with her father cleared and the shadow lifted from her. But deep in his heart he knew that when he cast off from this wharf, he would in reality be going out of Joyce's life. This was his *Klahowya* to her. The path that he must walk was binding him to Elizabeth and putting a continent between himself and Joyce.

He said slowly, lengthening these last moments with her: "Joyce, I'm going away. I'm going after those six men. Bill will tell you something about it. I arranged with him to visit you whenever he can, and old Dad Pence is going back to the Alooska to be company for you."

Though she asked no questions about his trip, her dark eyes were big with wonder. Alan was tempted to tell her all. He could depend on *her* not to breathe one word of it. A score of times he had confided Police secrets to her and she had given him invaluable information gleaned from Indians and 'breeds.

But his plan was a desperate gamble, and Joyce would surely recognize it as such. She might lose faith in so dubious a venture. And he thought: "I'll be entirely out of the country, out of it for weeks and weeks. She mustn't know that; she'd feel too terribly alone; she might even come to believe I've deserted her, as I did last winter. But if she thinks I'm still here on the Waterways, perhaps working secretly, it'll help her keep up hope."

"Joyce," he instructed her, "I'd like for you, there at the trading post, to question those Indians and *métis* when they bring in peltry. You might pick up some information about those six men. When old Mugwa-Etthen and his band come in, I'd especially like you to find out where they intend to pass the summer. It'll be up north of you, at some tangle of creeks where they can put out fish weirs, but you find out just where."

"I'll do it, Alan. And if there's anything else, to help you——"

"There isn't, except to keep your courage up and be careful of yourself. It's brave of you to go back there. I don't know any other girl on earth with the bravery to do that. You've been a real daughter to your father

all along. Joyce, if you'll promise to take care of yourself there on the Alooska, I'll go away feeling a mighty lot happier. I'll be worrying about you."

"I'll get along, Alan," she said simply; but a flush suffused her cheeks at his ardent praise of her.

As she gave him her hand, wishing him good fortune on his venture, Alan had a vision of the lonely, fear-torn weeks ahead of Joyce. He was all sympathy and tenderness for her—so brave a girl, so loyal to her dad, so spirited and pretty and unbeaten by all *les misères* she had fallen upon.

In those moments he was shaken with the temptation to tell Joyce of the secret and powerful circumstances which had torn him away from her and made inevitable his engagement to Elizabeth. He had done Joyce a wrong; he owed her a confession and an explanation of his motive. In her presence he felt a throbbing question between them, the question of why he had gone from her to another girl. But there were reasons that kept him silent. He had fought that fight in his own conscience; he had acted deliberately. To tell Joyce of it now would avail nothing. He felt that Joyce, however much she had loved him once, had gone back to a casual friendship with him now, and a resurrection of their intimacy would be painful to them both.

Her hand seemed to him ridiculously small for his big roughened clasp. It seemed all wrong to be bidding her good-bye in the same way as he would Pedneault or Bill. The impulse which had come to him on that other dawn up the Alooska, swept over him now; he wanted to take her into his arms and kiss her and make her feel that his strength was hers too in the battle to save her dad. But he remembered the expression of her eyes that had checked him then; remembered the steady

questioning gaze which said to him that a kiss would be a sacred thing to her now and must be significant—or must not be at all. And that memory stopped him.

With a handclasp, a final word of cheer about her father, he stepped into the motor-canoe, started the engine, headed the boat out from the shore. Looking back, he watched Joyce's slender figure grow more and more wraith-like in the mist until his eyes no longer could see her.

CHAPTER XI: THE DARK HOUR

AT THE MacMillan Trading Post Joyce was awaiting a visit from Bill Hardsock. A young Loucheux, John Tabanask, had brought a note from Bill, saying he intended to cut aside from a routine patrol down the Mackenzie, and would be along sometime late this evening.

Free for a little while, Joyce had slipped away from the post, down to the Alooska, down its bank a rifle-shot to a brook mouth, where a large shelf of rock jutted into the river. The spot had always been her favorite swimming place, with a thirty-foot depth of still water to dive into and the moss-padded rock to lie on and bask in the mellow, life-giving sun. Too tired to go swimming today, she had gone down there to meet Bill, for she wished to talk to him alone.

The heavy rains had ceased for a few hours. With the long northern twilight gradually deepening, the evening was brooding and melancholy. In the woods behind her the white-crowns were singing their wistful evening songs. Great owls on eerie wings were drifting back and forth across the stream, hooting their weird eight-noted calls. From some piney knoll faraway north came the wail of that she-wolf whose mate Joyce had shot. Night after night, Joyce had listened to the primitive mourn of that mateless animal.

This last week had been a feverishly busy one for her. In spite of heavy incessant rains the Dogrib bands had come in, and "lone-fire" Indians and 'breeds were always about the place. Out of the nowhere of the

wilderness they came, from single families to bands of thirty and forty, with dogs and skin tents and all their earthly possessions; and after trading for traps, ammunition, tobacco, sugar and flour, a bit of calico for the women, a trinket for the children, they left on some canoe highway, vanishing for another year into the nowhere they had come from.

With no hesitation Joyce was sacrificing the entire trading stock. Word of her good bargains had gone out by moccasin telegraph, and the peltry was rolling in beyond all her expectations. Her days were from twenty to twenty-four hours long. Hasty meals for herself and old Dad Pence. Sleep in broken bits when she could snatch an hour. Sorting and grading furs as expertly as any man. Haggling over prices when some dusky customer thought he could cheat a mere slip of a girl. Answering the endless question, "How much for this fox-felluh, otter-felluh, mink-felluh, marten-felluh —huh?" At times feeling the hungry eyes of some insolent sub-chief or lusty young 'breed following her. Asserting over and over, "I can't give you any fight-water; there isn't a drop in the house." Passing out pain-killer free, and prescribing kerosene for itchy little heads. . . . It was work for any two men, and she was doing it lone-handed, earning the fur-dollars to fight her dad's battle.

The week past had taken a heavy toll of her strength. She was nearer exhaustion than she knew—so tired that objects danced before her eyes and her whole body ached dully. But worse than this physical strain was the brooding despair that haunted the background of her thoughts—a despair that gradually had tightened upon her since Alan Baker had bought out of service. . . .

Faithfully carrying out Alan's instructions, she had

learned where old Mugwa-Etthen's band was camped, and had done a bit of detective work on her own account. Some of the men who came in to trade, wilderness bush-lopers of no fixed home or band, had roamed from Hershell to Chipewyan, from the Liard to the Coppermine, during the past fall and winter. Questioning them carefully, she tried to find someone who had seen or heard of those six bandit strangers. But she failed to gleam the slightest hint of information. No one in this country had glimpsed them.

The mystery of their sudden appearance engrossed her, as it had Alan; and with good reason it made her keenly uneasy. Those men were hiding in the Thal-Azzah, not many hours distant. They were an unknown danger. Bold in their first crime, they must feel doubly confident now, after the patrol had failed. The one man in the country who could outwit and out-fight them was hundreds of miles away, following some strange and puzzling adventure of his own. Knowing in her heart that her father was innocent, she believed that those men had put that fateful pack of furs in the shed because of some animus against him. Their hostility might extend to her, his daughter; and they might make some attempt against her.

Two days ago, a party of Yellowknife men had come down the Alooska, bringing a pack of stolen furs, and bearing a ghastly burden in their canoes—two murdered Loucheux, young men whom Joyce had known and liked. The Yellowknives had found the bodies on a riffle between two islands and found the pack caught in an overhanging willow. Joyce listened to their account and looked at the bodies, and pieced together the story of how those bandits had traveled faster than Alan had calculated during that morning of hot chase. To lighten the canoes they had tossed out several of

the heaviest, cheapest bales. Meeting the two young Loucheux, they had forced the Indians into their boats, forced them to help paddle; and then, at the end of that frantic dash, had blown their brains out and flung their bodies overboard.

The story of that bestial cruelty had nearly overwhelmed Joyce. It struck a secret terror into her, and she was desperately glad that 'breeds and Indians *were* around the post constantly. There were times, when she thought of those vicious brutal criminals so near her, that she wanted to flee back to the safety of the post and the mothering kindness of Mrs. Drummond.

What was Alan Baker doing? He was off on some mission by which he hoped to catch those bandits. From an unguarded slip Bill made, Joyce knew he had gone entirely out of the country. Beyond that, she could only make vague guesses. She had thought he would recruit several trustworthy 'breeds and lead his own party to the Inconnu, but he had not done that at all. She could not imagine how he expected to take those criminals, or where he was, or what he was doing.

Before she left Endurance, Bill had told her that Alan had bought out and had severed relations with the Force for good and all. That was the news which Joyce all week had been brooding about. That ominous revelation had been a greater drain on her strength and courage than all the trading work and dread of those murderers. Elizabeth had wanted him to get out of service. He was out now. Elizabeth had wanted him to take that Victoria job. He probably would take it now. Elizabeth had had her way with him. The thing which had held her and Alan apart no longer existed. Joyce felt that the two of them had surely had a definite understanding before he went away. In her heart a question loomed up fearfully. All the past week, while she

was working, trading, housekeeping, that question had danced before her like a specter: Was Elizabeth waiting there at Endurance for Alan to return to her or send for her? It was either that, or they definitely had ended their engagement. There could be no middle ground now.

At Fort Endurance, Elizabeth had made a remark to her, the morning she left, about meeting her possibly in Edmonton. It was a covert and heartless allusion to her father's trial; and Elizabeth had said "we" in a manner to leave no doubt she meant Alan and herself. Had Elizabeth lied?

For more than a year Joyce had seen Alan Baker slipping away from her, little by little. She had fought for her secret hopes as one will fight in the face of death. She wanted Alan; her days were like a passionate cry for him. He was the meaning and purpose of life to her, and she could no longer bear up under her racking doubt. She too had come to the parting of the ways, and must take some irrevocable step.

In the twilight she heard the drone of Bill's motor-canoe down the Alooska. When the craft swung around a bend, she stood up and waved. Catching sight of her on the jutting rock, Bill glided in alongside, stepped out, and laid a heavy stone on the painter rope.

He looked hungry and tired to Joyce as she greeted him. She knew he had made his long patrol at a fast clip, sacrificing sleep and meals, in order to slip in this visit to her. A dozen times last winter he had done that, when it meant a long hard grind on snowshoes.

Bill held a warm place in her heart. He had a man's stubborn will-power, he was honest and open as daylight, he was loyal clean through. Joyce knew that Bill loved her, in a dogged hopeless way, asking nothing

more than to do favors for her and be always dependable when she needed someone. She was sorry for him, terribly sorry he loved her. For his sake she had several times rebuffed him; but it hurt Bill so visibly that she had stopped.

She invited him: "Bill, let's go up to the post. You're tired. And I'll get you a bite to eat."

"I can't, Joyce," he reluctantly refused. "I've got to light out for Endurance. With Alan gone and Larry shot up, Ped and I have to hit the ball proper. I just wanted to drop past and see that everything is all right with you. I heard about that pack of furs and those two young Loucheux fellows. Met the Yellowknives down on the Mackenzie, going on in to Endurance."

A shudder swept through Joyce. She made herself forget.

They sat down there on the rock. Noticing Bill fumbling in his pipe pocket, Joyce insisted that he should smoke, and she cupped a match for him in her hands.

He asked, "How've you been making out, Joyce?"

"Better than I even expected. I've taken in an awful lot of furs."

"That's good. But I mean, any trouble with these 'breeds or Smokies?" He spoke rather belligerently toward a hypothetical enemy of hers.

"Not the slightest bit," Joyce assured him. That was not exactly true; a couple incidents of the last week had been a little ugly. But she felt she could guard herself against those cowardly men. The incidents, as Bill would say, were nothing to write home about.

She asked rather hesitantly, "Has anything happened at Fort Endurance, Bill?" She was thinking of Elizabeth waiting there; and that beating question crowded out even her father's trouble. It took an effort

to speak of it. Bill knew more of Alan's plans than she did. He might know the answer to that question.

He said: "No, nothing much has happened. I moved up to Alan's cabin. Haskell has made Whipple a corporal. Imagine that! The new doctor for Hershell Island came past on his way down north, and looked at Larry. He couldn't do any more than Father Claverly has done. Larry's getting some strength back, and that chest wound is past the danger point; but his leg is all busted. The doctor said to send him outside to Edmonton soon as he's strong enough to travel, and have some operation on it; but he said Larry 'ud be permanently crippled. No hope of anything better."

"Have they sent—— Is Dad still there?"

"Yes. We can't spare a man to take him out. He'll be there a week or ten days yet. A constable is coming down from Norman to take him to Edmonton."

"You'll tell him about my good luck here, Bill? And tell him I'll be with him as soon as I close out this post?"

Bill nodded. Personally he hoped that this news might lift Dave MacMillan out of his despondency. Dave's state of mind was causing Bill anxiety. Resenting any kindness, he had sunk into a sullen mood, uncaring, hopeless—a man brooding self-destruction.

Joyce forced herself to ask, "Have you heard anything at all of Alan, Bill?"

"No, not a word. I don't expect to for some time."

"You must know where he is and what he's doing. . . ."

Bill realized she was asking him to tell her of Alan's venture. He wanted to tell her; and he knew he could trust her, but Alan had asked him not to let her know where he'd gone, and Alan might have personal reasons for it.

He lied: "No, I don't know. I'd just be guessing."

"But he's coming back, sometime, to Endurance?" Joyce persisted.

"He may come back and may not. But not to stay. He's out of service. They don't often let a man in when he's bought out. And Alan wouldn't ever start all over again as a constable. He'd never serve under Haskell, and that Spring-heel Johnny is rooted in solid here. No, Alan broke away complete. He turned his cabin and things over to me. He isn't intending to come back. I know definite."

Joyce felt herself nearing an abyss, with each question taking her a step closer. But she could not stop; it was as though some fatal fascination was luring her on and on.

"How do you know that, Bill?"

"Why, he's going to take that job in Victoria."

"Did *he* say so?"

"Yes. Told *me*. One of the last things he said."

There was a moment's silence. Bill looked at Joyce curiously. She was staring down at the rock, plucking with trembling fingers at the wolf-foot moss. She was pale. He noticed that she was trembling slightly; he thought it must be from the cold, here on this river-edge rock in the sharp air of twilight.

He suggested: "You're chilly, Joyce. I'd better be leaving and let you go back to the post. I'll be along next week again." And when she shook her head: "I've got a blanket in the boat then; I'll get it, and you can throw it around you."

"No, no. I'm—I'm comfortable enough. Did Alan say—" the words came slowly, like reluctant footsteps —"say anything about when he'll get married?"

"He didn't exactly say when, but it'll be as soon as he's carried through this scheme of his."

Joyce's hand stopped plucking at the wolf-foot. Bill noticed she sat very still, motionless, her whole body tensed. But he was no reader of people; he knew nothing whatsoever of what Alan meant to her, or of the tragedy he himself was bringing her on this innocent visit.

He glanced at the purpling river. He ought to be leaving; ought to be past a dangerous channel forty miles down-stream before deep dark.

A question came from Joyce:

"He and—and Elizabeth—have decided definitely, then, Bill?"

"Yes. She's waiting for him to come for her or send for her. They've made plans to be married in Edmonton and have their honeymoon in the Selkirks and then go on over to Victoria."

Joyce asked one last question. She asked it calmly, without faltering or even pausing on the precipice edge.

"Did Elizabeth say that, or did Alan?"

"Alan said it. I overheard them, that night he left. They planned it together, there in his cabin. . . ."

Joyce was aroused by old Dad Pence calling for her. Raising her head from her arms, she looked around. Gropingly she realized that she was there on the jutting rock, numbed with cold—with a cold that was more than physical.

Dawn had come. The dark hours had passed. It took her moments to realize. Time had stood still for her since she told Bill good-bye.

A sleety drizzle had started to fall. The day was cold, one of those cold summer days that are unnatural and terribly desolate.

Old Pence was shouting again and again, with a quaver of fear in his voice at discovering she had been

gone for several hours. His shouts roused Joyce. She rose up, stiff and cramped, and answered him:

"I'm here. I'm coming."

Before going up the river bank she had the presence of mind to go down to the water edge and bathe her face and hands and smooth back her hair.

At the wharf edge old Pence looked at her perplexedly when she came up to him.

"Why, gal, where've you been? I woke up, heerd no stirrin' in your room, went out an' peeked inter th' winder; an' you gone, couldn't find hide ner hair of you. . . . It gi' me an awful fright."

"I'm sorry," Joyce managed. "I fell asleep down there after Bill left. I guess I was tired."

Old Pence never doubted. He sympathized: "You must be near froze, honey. I know last week about fagged you out—with all this tradin', an' worritin' about your dad."

She went back to the trading store with old Pence, and prepared breakfast for him. She could eat nothing herself, but drank a little coffee. Over his birch-marl pipe old Pence began whittling again at the "story-stick" he was carving these days. The stick was partly a reminder, like a string about a person's finger, not to wander off forgetfully into the woods; and partly it was a long-standing ambition of his, for with his razor-keen, six-bladed knife he was carving the story of his life. And he was going about it in earnest, carving steadily every day. It was as though he had some dim fore-knowledge of the black wings hovering—a warning to hurry.

Noticing Joyce's exceeding paleness and her exhaustion, he bade her:

"Now you got to go an' rest, gal. I'll tend to th' furs this mornin', if anybody comes."

Joyce went into her room. It seemed so cold; she could not get warm; the chill seemed to have pierced her through and through. She kindled a fire in her small sheet-iron stove and put in wood, and then lay down on the bed.

From the dresser Alan's picture looked down at her. She did not glance away, but looked at it steadily, as she lay there so motionless and still.

The exhaustion that had drained her had left her very quiet of mind. She could think clearly, in thoughts precise and rational. She had never experienced an hour when she could look through the fog and confusion of her emotions and see everything so starkly. It was a strange unearthly mood. She seemed to be outside of herself, studying herself in an impersonal fashion. Her own thoughts were like the voice of another person talking quietly to her. . . .

You fought this battle once, Joyce, and you won it; and then you handed the sword back to your enemy and gave him power over you again. When Bill first told you last fall of Alan's engagement—do you remember the heart-break of those weeks, Joyce? You finally rose above it, you conquered. But then you permitted yourself to hope again. When Alan merely came past here on a patrol, after staying away from you all winter, you went wild with hope.

Last night Bill came to you once again; and after he left, you collapsed there on that rock. Joyce, don't lay yourself open to agony such as that. You may say that you are helpless; that you cannot cast out your love for Alan as you would throw aside a stone. But you can disarm and bind that love so that it never will have the slightest power over you. Joyce, you must forget Alan Baker. *You must, you must!* You cannot turn this way or that; you cannot evade it; you must

walk that path. You must never again look back. You have been punished for looking back, and your punishment has been terrible. There was an hour last night that you looked out on those dark waters beyond the rock, and their whispering called to you, and you nearly answered. In self-preservation you must forget Alan Baker.

That pride of yours, Joyce, which kept him from knowing your heart, and that strength of yours which lifted your father out of chaos up beside you—where are they now? Is your life bounded by a man's smile and affectionate word? Aren't there other things—your father, your Ottawa friends, your work with the Bureau, your sports, your dancing and riding and personal ambitions—aren't those real values, dependent on no man?

As you answer this question, as you resolve to forget Alan Baker, in that measure you are mistress of yourself, mistress over all the thwarting and evil circumstances of your life. Only remember that you must forget Alan Baker. You must walk that path. And this time, let there be no looking back. . . .

As she lay there gazing up at Alan's picture and seeing her course so clearly, it seemed to Joyce that if she could destroy his image there on the dresser, if only she had the courage to do that, it would be a symbol of destroying his image in her heart. And it would not be hard; not nearly so hard as what she had gone through last winter. She had traversed that path of renunciation then; she had in reality retraced only a little part of it, for her hopes had never been confident. She felt that her collapse last night was due nearly as much to the heavy strain of last week and the anxiety over her father, as to the crushing revelation Bill had made to her.

After a little while she got up from the bed; and going over to the dresser, began taking out of it all of Alan's letters to her. They dated back across six years, addressed to her here, at her college, at Ottawa—all of them carefully treasured. Pack by pack they went into the stove.

There was good augury for Joyce in the firm and unhesitant way she set about burning them.

He had given her more than a few presents: a costly old-fashioned lavallière which had been his mother's; a miniature hope-chest of India-silk kerchiefs which had been the envy of her college friends; a gold-and-ivory hunting knife; a wrist-watch for graduation present, and a dozen less expensive gifts. Joyce laid aside the lavallière to send to Elizabeth; but the other gifts she destroyed by fire.

She was not vindictive nor angry. She hated to destroy things which had cost Alan so dearly. Alan had been good to her, in a friend's way. Even now he was facing unknown danger and hardships to save her father. She made it clear to herself that in destroying his gifts she meant nothing derogatory to him. But there must be no mementos and no looking back.

She took his picture from the dresser, and burned it.

Afterwards she sat by the table writing a long letter to her Bureau chief in Ottawa, telling him frankly about her father, her hope to see her father vindicated and then to bring him over to Ottawa with her; and asking him if his former promise of a position whenever she wished to return was still good.

The little stove had grown cherry-red along its sides and driven the chill away. Joyce felt a warm glow gradually creeping through her body. She was tired now. A drowsy, not unpleasant languor was stealing

over her. She thought she would lie down and rest, just a few minutes . . .

At noon, hours later, when old Pence looked in, he was pleased to find her plunged into a dreamless sleep. The secret worry he had noted on her face this last week seemed to have gone now. Her features were pale, but there was a look of peace on them, of some strange spiritual peace at heart.

Tiptoeing quietly away, he went back to his story-stick and pipe; to his guesses about the mystery of those six bandit strangers and the deeper mystery of where Alan Baker was, of what single-handed venture Baker was on.

CHAPTER XII: BY LONE CAMP FIRES

THAT gray dawn when he said good-bye to Joyce at Fort Endurance, Baker set off alone on a journey of a thousand miles. Instead of heading northeast toward the Thal-Azzah where the bandits were hiding, he turned his canoe prow directly away from them and started south, up the Mackenzie.

His venture was taking him out of the North altogether; taking him south through the Slave and Athabasca country, and down across the latitudes clear to Edmonton.

He did not delude himself about his plan. It was little better than a desperate gamble, and he knew it. But the usual man-hunting methods were useless against those criminals; and his plan was the last thing in the world they would be expecting.

By traveling in his own motor-canoe, depending entirely on his own resources, he expected to cut ten days from the fastest time of the fur-company boats. He hoped to lay down the speediest trip ever made from the Circle out to civilization.

The first day he traveled one hundred and eighty miles without a halt, driving ahead all the long day at a relentless pace. Toilsome up-stream miles they were, with his craft a tiny dot creeping up the middle of the broad Mackenzie.

Sleeping through the three-hour night in his boat at a creek mouth, he woke, bathed, ate breakfast, and swung out again upon that mighty water.

In those lonely hours, as he stared in reverie at the

shimmering pine hills, it was borne in upon Alan that he had forever cut himself off from life here in this North country. With his bridges burned, he was already beginning to see his years in this frontier land from the perspective of detachment. Comparing them with his boyhood and with the dull city-stifled existence lying ahead for him now, he realized that his foot-free career at Fort Endurance had been, and would be, the only happy epoch in his life. The great North had enthralled him. To the end of his life he would be at heart a northern man, hungering for those unpeopled spaces, for those virile winds and apple-green waters and the wild beauty of those lone lands.

He felt as though he had been torn up by the roots. The system he had founded at Fort Endurance had been his own creation. He had been a builder in his own right. From the ground up, Fort Endurance belonged to him. He and Curt and Jimmy had cut the very timber for barracks and cabins. He had mapped out the patrol routes, catalogued the dusky nomad bands, stamped his authority upon that virgin country. All the threads of that ramified system had been held in his hands—Indian scouts slipping in with whispers from the Strong-Woods, old chiefs taking counsel with him of tribal affairs, patrols coming and going, would-be criminals under constant surveillance. The work had been his particular work in life. "Sergeant Baker of Endurance" stood for something. There was but one such man in the Dominion. Now he was cut off from it, an alien of lost identity, never to be a part of it, the guiding genius of it, again.

On the third day he met a lone-fire Indian, a young Chipewyan wandering aimlessly, with some secret personal tragedy preying on him. Alan took him into the motor-canoe, and together they traveled on. Hardly

speaking a dozen words a day, they worked on up the Mackenzie, sleeping by turns, spelling each other at the motor. Through heavy rains, past wind-frenzied lakes where they crept around the shore-line, stopping only once—to buy a drum of gas and can of oil at Providence—they reached Great Slave at one prodigious drive.

Raising a blanket sail to a northeast wind, they scudded across the island-dotted lake from Resolution, and whipped up the Quatre Fourches delta toward Fort Smith.

Utterly worn out, they camped one night on a midstream islet of sand and gravel where winds kept the insect scourges away. As he lay in his blanket that night beside a lonely fire, looking up at the dim big stars and watching the moon brighten into silver, Alan tried to find a vicarious sort of happiness by imagining himself with Joyce at her wilderness home up the Big Alooska. But he saw only her wistful face, upturned to him, panic-stricken, when he told her of that fur pack in the shed. And his thoughts dwelt on her refusing his kiss that morning, and how she had made him understand that a kiss must be sacred and significant between them now. Even in her great need of his help Joyce had not used her power as a girl to sway him.

He could still hear her casual tones when she inquired about his marriage to Elizabeth. It meant, it could mean nothing else, that Joyce had put him out of her heart. The old intimate comradeship was dead. She must have sensed that in stopping his visits to her, he had yielded to Elizabeth. She must have weighed him and found him wanting. In spirit, if not in letter, he had thrown her over for another girl, and in self-defense she had hardened herself against him. She was planning her life anew, and he figured not at all in it.

It was as though Alan had some dim intuitive awareness of Bill's visit to Joyce, and the black hours she had gone through afterwards, and her final victory over the old agony of wanting him.

Tossing restlessly in his blanket, watching the dim clouded stars above him, he looked steadily at those two girls who had loomed so large upon his manhood. In this last week a cataclysm had happened in his life, breaking into the old order, blasting the even routine of week and month and season. It had opened his eyes in a deeper way than ever before to the preciousness of his intimacy with Joyce, to the priceless quality of their former comradeship. Now, when it was irrecallable, he was asking himself whether the motive and powerful circumstance which had actuated him were humanly justifiable. Had not he and Joyce had a right to happiness? Had he, in his stern sacrifice, been blind to the needs of the human heart?

Tired out by days of incessant travel, he fell asleep at last, with pictures floating before him of Joyce's face in the cold dawn-light up the Big Alooska; of Joyce coming to him, a slender girlish figure, wraith-like out of the mist at Fort Endurance; of her poignant sweetness and bravery there on the wharf. And he dreamed that in his cabin it had been she, not Elizabeth, whose arm had been around him and who was waiting for him when this lone adventure should be ended.

At Fort Smith the heavy rains had rendered the sixteen-mile portage impossible to teams and to the motor-trucks which plied that stretch. A crowd of Indians, *métis,* trappers, and traders were dammed up there, waiting. Alan dared not wait; his days were too precious. In his decision to go on, his young Chipewyan

friend stuck with him. Shouldering their craft, they plodded stoically across that slippery, red-clay stretch to Fitzgerald.

Alan was amazed at the evidences of civilization there. Planes were bringing mail and passengers to and from Edmonton. Traders over west in the Liard country and east toward the Churchill headwaters were using aircraft for their wilderness trips. Mining companies had established a base there and were dropping off field parties all through that dimly-known region. It seemed to Alan that civilization was washing farther and farther up the Three Rivers toward the far frontier land that had been his home.

Among the north-bound crowd waiting at Fitzgerald, he spotted the tall, slightly-stooped figure of Superintendent Williamson, who was going north to inspect the down-river posts. The superintendent was the last person in the world whom Alan wanted to meet. His first superior officer when he graduated from the "Awkward Squad," Williamson had been good to him and taken a fatherly interest in his brilliant work. What would he say when he learned that his protégé had bought out and deserted the Force? . . . "Your commission wasn't forthcoming, so you quit! Your loyalty to our work went no deeper than that!"

When he saw Williamson glance at him and start a little in recognition and then edge nearer, Alan had a desire to stamp his foot on the ground and disappear. Williamson was going to excoriate him. For all the mellowness of his years, the old officer, veteran of the Riel Rebellion and the Yukon days, played no favorites. In his eyes a quitter was worse than a gross incompetent.

Passing by, ten feet away, Williamson merely nodded slightly and said, "Good luck, Baker."

Alan understood. He thought: "In civilian clothes, so far away from Endurance . . . He thinks I'm on some detective detail. Good Lord, when he finds I'm out, bought out——!"

Williamson's esteem was a precious thing to Alan, as precious as a father's. An impulse swept him to talk with the superintendent and tell him the whole sorry story. After his experience with Haskell's unscrupulous dealings, he foresaw that when Williamson reached Endurance, Haskell would give his own version of the affair and gain the division commander's sympathy and keep the truth from ever becoming known.

But there was the matter of that signed affidavit. Alan refused to go back on that; and even if he did he would literally be branding himself a liar. What did his personal feud with Haskell matter now? He was out of the Mounted. And the superintendent would try to stop his venture if he heard, for it was beyond the law.

He allowed Williamson to go past.

Setting their boat to water, he and the young Chipewyan hurried on to the great delta-mouth of the Peace, where they caught up with a steamer going on to McMurray. The young Indian wanted to turn west to the Rockies and see the Land of Ice Mountains. Giving him the motor-canoe and the outfit, Alan shook hands, said *Klahowya,* and went aboard the boat.

A number of the passengers knew him. Seeing him in civilian clothes, they nodded knowingly to one another. Several made bold to ask what detective mission he was on and to wish him *bon chance.* One of them, who asked whether he and Elizabeth Spaulding were married yet, was bewildered at the savage way Alan cut him off. Another, an old Norman trader who had known of his long intimacy with Joyce, assumed

they were married, and in his rough way jokingly hinted at a first-born. Alan was not curt with him, but he turned away without a word, a sudden anguish rising in him.

In his cabin where he fled to escape his questioners, he lay on the berth, staring up at the beams, tossing feverishly, as though that trader's words had exploded something within him. He was remembering that August, years ago, when Joyce left the North and went out to school. And her letters, and his jealousy when she mentioned man-friends, and his relief when he found they were but casual in her life. And her return, and his leap of heart when she tripped down the gangplank to him, so trim and lovely in those pretty clothes, and their long talk that moonlit night in Mrs. Drummond's flower garden. They had tacitly assumed they would be married. They had talked of plans, had spoken of children. Now they were almost strangers; now another girl was waiting at Endurance for him to marry her.

As he lay there in the cabin gloom, with the steamer throbbing on toward Steel-End, Alan wondered what Joyce's reaction would be if he should go to her and frankly tell her about that tragic incident in his life which had brought about his engagement to Elizabeth. Joyce would understand his motive. She would no longer think he'd acted of his own free will. Perhaps if she knew this truth, she might allow him to resume their old intimacy. . . . But Elizabeth, what of her? She was waiting, waiting there at Endurance, for him to marry her. In honor and faith he could not break away now. That secret and powerful circumstance still bound him and would bind him to her all his life.

CHAPTER XIII: TWO MUSKETEERS

A HALF-MILE up in the fleecy clouds, up above the pretty city of Edmonton, Mr. "Buzzard" Featherof was dropping out toy parachutes carrying free cakes and printed matter of the E-Z Kleen Soap and Washing Powder Company, Ltd.

He was tired, stiff, hungry and indescribably bored.

During the late war Buzzard had knocked an assorted number of Fokkers, Taubers and Albatrosses out of the air; had come down himself a couple times rather precipitately; and once, commanding a five-plane circus, had brought down a Super-Zeppelin in the Channel after it had dropped its "eggs" in cabbage patches around darkened London.

Since his return to Canada, Buzzard had taken a fling at aërial map-making in British Columbia; had worked a season with the Manitoba Fire Prevention as a "smoke hawk;" had had a go at air mail down in the States; had strafed grasshopper plagues west of Moosejaw with poison dust; had printed smoke signs against the heavens; and with the film people for a year, had bombed papier-mâché French châteaux down amid the flowers and climate of Los Angeles.

Recently, tired of working for other folk, he had raked together some money and bought a machine of his own, which he now was flying.

It was a queer nameless contraption, this monoplane of his—an assemblage of piano wire, canvas, spruce and iron, held together by luck and Buzzard's wiz-

ardry at flying. It had originally been a White Speedair with "Jenny" engine, but he had re-doped the fabric and put in a second-hand Whirlwind and equipped it with third-hand under-gear of the float-wheel type, and overhauled it generally till little of the original machine remained. Only his warm friendship with the aviation inspector kept it from being junked. Its safety factor was approximately 1:1, but a fifty-fifty chance was all Buzzard asked. His fellow-birdmen considered it an aërial one-horse shay, and laid bets on when it would shimmy to pieces. To them it was a miracle how the old crate ever took off; a mystery how it ever stayed up; and both miracle and mystery how Buzzard could make those beautiful three-point landings with an old antique like that.

But somehow—and this is the rock-bottom test of any flying machine—it had never yet come down before Buzzard wanted it to. And it did have speed; anything lacking speed would never have satisfied him. Such as it was, it was his very own; and no mother was ever prouder of a cross-eyed, snaggle-toothed child than Buzzard was of his White Speedair.

He was, however, ambitious to get a big new DeHavilland, so that he could safely take up a girl down in Kamloops and carry her along with him on his airy path of life. He could achieve that new DeHavilland only by making a substantial down payment, showing some good-sized contracts, and surrendering his life insurance policies.

But with no advertising or big company to back him, Buzzard had found this free-lance work to be tough sledding. Had found difficulty keeping up repairs on his old machine, let alone getting a new one. Jobs were sheer accidents. Except for the faint possibility of mur-

dering some more grasshoppers over near High Hat, the work he was finishing this noon was the last thing in sight.

Besides, he had discovered that dropping out toy parachutes at free-lancing was not vastly more thrilling than doing the same thing at a handsome salary for some advertising company.

As he heaved overboard the last of the E-Z Kleen Soap and printed matter, and headed back for the landing field, he yawned and swore:

"The devil with this peace-time stuff! Oh Lord, I wish they'd bring on another Unpleasantness."

It was in some such frame of mind, as he landed and crawled out of the cockpit, that he saw a tall lanky individual, in lace boots, khaki trousers, jacket and gray hat, get out of a waiting taxi and saunter toward him.

The stranger, as he came up, looked at the machine with that peculiar respectful gaze of a person who has never flown in one.

Buzzard thought, "If that fellow asks me to take him for a joy ride, I'll murder him with a monkey-wrench!" A moment later, as he got a closer look at that hard purposive face, he decided: "No, he's not that kind. Looks like some timber duke. Maybe wants me to fly him out to his limit. Thirty-dollar job—damfiwill!"

The stranger came on. "Hello."

Buzzard answered tartly, "Hello yourself."

The stranger paid no attention to the brusque reply. Instead he reached out his hand. It was a good-looking hand, big, calloused, fingers like iron bars.

"Name's Baker," he introduced himself. "Alan Baker."

Buzzard partly thawed. This fellow Baker looked to be somebody. His slow smile was mighty fetching; his clear intelligent eyes were kindly, warm, friendly.

"Glad to know you, Baker. Mine's Featherof—James Arbuthnot Featherof."

"Good gracious! All that? But what do people *call* you?"

They both grinned. Completely thawed, Featherof got out cigarettes. "They call me 'Buzzard.' Wear red helmet; never flop my wings."

" 'Buzzard'—that's more like. I saw you sailing around up there when I got off the train. Made inquiries and hustled out here to the field."

"Uh-huh," Buzzard stalled, wondering what was coming.

"Was on my way down to Winnipeg," Alan further remarked. "Expected I'd have to go down there, or maybe to Calgary, to find a machine and a pilot."

"Uh-huh."

Baker jerked a thumb at the plane. "Whose is that?"

"Looking at you. Belongs to me and myself, Unlimited. Bought it with cigarette coupons."

Baker's face brightened a little, and now Buzzard noticed that this hard-bitten man was deeply worried but was hiding his trouble and talking with a jest on his lips.

"So the machine belongs to you. Glad to hear that. Working on your own hook, I suppose? That's still better. Say, Featherof, how long are you booked up ahead?"

Buzzard had found it good policy to lie. If he made out there was a crushing demand for his services, it impressed people and got him jobs—sometimes.

"Oh, about two months," he said carelessly. "All depends on how much flying weather I get."

Baker plucked a blade of grass and chewed it meditatively. Finally he asked: "Say, Featherof, you couldn't shake free for a couple or three weeks, could you? Get sick, or have to get married, or something like that?"

Buzzard took thought as he batted an eye. A couple or three weeks. . . . Must be a good-sized job. . . . Might pay well. . . . Oh damn the pay! Always thinking of pay. Getting commercial. . . . This fellow Baker, whatever he wanted, looked like the kind of man a person would like to just knock around with.

"I might," he answered. "Depends. What kind of flying do you want me to do? What for a job is it?"

"That would take me some time to explain. I wouldn't want any man to tackle it without him understanding the whole thing, or then he might feel I'd dragged him into trouble."

Something in Baker's tone made Buzzard look at him sharply. "Nothing illeg—crook—out of the ordinary, is it?"

"It's all three, and then some."

Buzzard bit his cigarette. "'And *then some!*' My eyes! Who're you declaring war on?"

"If you want to know who I am, I was in the Mounted. The O. C. here at Edmonton can tell you about me. And I can give you other references."

"You were in the Mounted?" Buzzard frowned thoughtfully. "Baker—the Mounted. . . . Say, haven't I heard or read somewhere . . . Are you that Sergeant Baker down north near the Arctic?"

Alan nodded.

"My eyes! I've read about some of your doings. You're on a detective trick or something like that, Baker?"

With expert judgment Alan had been sizing up his new acquaintance, from his brick-red helmet, down across his oil-splattered jumpers, to his "sidewalk" shoes. He read the daredeviltry in this Featherof. Black hair and snappy black eyes with crowfeet under them that told of the strain upon a pilot; a born recklessness stamped on his face; a quick adventuring glint in his eyes saying he was spirited enough to tackle anything—he was a man after Alan's own heart. And he had a machine of his own! If only he'd be interested, if only he'd go, it would save precious days looking for a plane and pilot.

Alan said: "My story is a long one. You look as hungry as I feel. . . ."

"I am, Baker. So hungry I could wipe my face with the slack of my stomach. Let's go eat and then talk."

Alan helped him pull a canvas over the machine. Together they stepped over to the taxi. As they rambled down town they swapped war yarns, discovered several mutual acquaintances, and came down to "Alan" and "Buzzard."

At the Château MacDonald Alan sent a telegram to Colonel Steele in Victoria. He wrote it swiftly, not daring to think twice of the fatal step.

AM OUT OF MOUNTED ACCEPTING YOUR FINE OFFER WILL YOU WIRE ME FIVE HUNDRED AS SALARY ADVANCE WOULD BE MIGHTY GRATEFUL LETTER FOLLOWING WITH DETAILS

ALAN BAKER

At the Prince of Wales café he and Buzzard ate dinner; and then for a solid hour Alan talked.

He told of the *Midnight Sun* robbery, of the chase, fight, escape, of Dave MacMillan's trouble; of his

resolve to help Joyce; of Joyce going bravely back to the lonely trading station; of his run-in with Haskell, his getting busted, his buying out of service, his thousand-mile trip to Edmonton.

He concluded: "I can't figure those bandits at all. I can't see how on earth they got into that country unknown, or how strangers like them know the ins and outs of it so perfectly. I can't understand why they put that pack of furs in MacMillan's shed. But when I catch them, I'll find these things out. I'll save MacMillan, and I'll—I'll make up to Joyce for a couple rotten things I did."

"But just where do the old crate and me come in at?" Buzzard asked.

Alan explained. With Buzzard following the words, his eyes afire, a thirsty gleam in them, Alan told why he was looking for an airplane, sketched the strategy of his campaign, explained his whole daring plan of running the bandits to earth.

He asked, "Will you go, Buzzard?" It was so very simple a question, but there was a prayer in his voice and eyes.

"Will I go?" Buzzard echoed, almost angrily. He put his fist down on the table so hard that the salt shaker jumped. "Will I go—on a trick like that? Hell's bells, what a question! Would I kiss my girl if she asked me to?"

Alan checked him: "Just a minute, Buzzard. Let's get a couple things clear. One is the matter of pay. I've got a couple hundred dollars in my pocket and five hundred coming by wire. It'll probably take all that to outfit us, so right now I can't pay you one red cent. But I'm going onto a good-salaried job, and I'll pay you before the year's over——"

"How much are you getting out of this? Nothing. Good! I'll take the same."

"But it's my affair, my quarrel."

"Then I'll horn in on it. And besides, I'll get my pay out of it in the long run. Look at the publicity value, Alan, if we pull a stunt like that! With all the headline advertising I'd get . . . Lord! I could book every fair, pumpkin show and fat-stock exhibition between Montreal and Vancouver!"

"But supposing your machine gets wrecked down north somewhere? It'd be a total loss. I couldn't pay you back for a long——"

"Usually when a fellow's plane is a total wreck, he doesn't worry much about the loss. All he cares about is a nice headstone."

"But look here now, and get this straight. We haven't any right to pull a trick like this, Buzzard. We're stepping outside the law. We're violating several hard and fast statutes. I happen to know."

Buzzard grew impatient. "Suppose we get down to essentials. You said you wanted to leave as soon as you could. Then let's talk sense. How about gas? This crate of mine isn't one of these trans-Atlantic planes. It'll do about seven hundred miles in a pinch, and then it stops and sets down. It won't run on reputation, for it hasn't got any."

"We'll be able to get gas and oil every couple hundred miles."

"That's settled then. Now about some other things. I'll have to get a pack-chute for you. A decent one'll cost three hundred. I've got to put on a new propeller; that toothpick on the old crate now is about ready to quit. A new prop costs like sixty. Then we need navigating instruments on a long trip like this. They come high. I could use fifteen hundred dollars."

Alan paled a little, but he said doggedly: "I'll raise it. I'll raise it somehow."

Buzzard was thoughtful for a moment. "Maybe," he said finally, "you won't have to raise it. I'll tell you what, Alan; you give me two hundred, and I'll try to manage the rest of it. You'll need money for your outfit and we'll have to keep some for operating expenses."

Alan nodded, though he did wonder what Buzzard meant by that word "manage."

They went back to the Château and waited. At three o'clock the wire came from Victoria.

THE FIVE HUNDRED IS ACCOMPANYING THIS LET ME KNOW IF NEED MORE LOOKING FORWARD TO SEEING YOU AND PRESUMABLY MEETING MRS BAKER

S G V STEELE

Alan was grateful for the desperately-needed money; grateful for the personal warmth of Colonel Steele's message. But he felt that he had sold his freedom now and indentured himself. This promise to go to Steele, this acceptance of salary in advance, seemed to him the last of a long chain of incidents which had started with the *Midnight Sun* robbery and had taken him out of the Mounted and now had bound him to a life he hated.

Stubbornly he forced his mind away from the heavy cost and regrets that tore at him. Putting aside three hundred dollars for operating expenses, he gave Buzzard two hundred and kept two hundred for himself. After arranging to meet out at the field that night, they separated.

Alan started down the street. At a pawn shop he stopped and bought a pair of binoculars. Powerful

x-12's of a costly make, they put a sad dent in his roll. Farther along he managed to purchase two heavy automatics, slipping the proprietor ten dollars extra in lieu of a permit. Then came emergency food for the trip and the flying togs Buzzard had advised him to get.

He still lacked a folding canoe, a number of small items, and one last piece of equipment—the most vital of all for his adventure. Down to fifteen dollars, he went into another pawn shop and soaked his expensive watch and a diamond heirloom of his mother's, making the owner promise to hold them for six months. With a hundred and seventy-five in his pocket, and a second-hand Ingersoll which the old gentleman had kindly given him, he walked out, breathing easier.

Progressing down the street, he completed his list, except for that one most necessary article. Money could not buy that. He sent all his purchases to the Château to be called for.

As he passed a fashion shop, his eyes happened to be caught by an exquisite *ceinture flechée,* a broad sash-belt hand-made in old Quebec. Thinking of the worn and faded one Joyce owned, he stood admiring this beauty, imagining how rapturous Joyce would be if she had it. She knew how to wear it properly, with a saucy grace that only the *métise* girls could match, for the wearing of the bright girdle was an ancient *voyageur* custom rapidly dying out. Wrapped twice around her waist, with the short end dangling in front and the long end flung over her shoulder . . . Forty precious dollars . . . but worth the price if she'd like it, a gift from him. . . .

With almost his last dollar he went in and bought the girdle.

Later, through the gathering twilight, he walked to the armory. Two companies were practicing there that

evening. By pretending to be a new Edmonton citizen anxious to learn how to drill and perhaps to join the militia, he not only got inside but was shown all around the place by a lieutenant impressed by his stalwart powerful physique.

The lieutenant went back to his duties, the companies went on drilling, the privileged spectators began trickling homeward. When the armory was closed at eleven, when the gaunt big building was locked up and deserted, it was Alan Baker who rose up, like a thief in the night, out of a big bass-drum case in a corner on the ground floor.

Not daring to strike a light, he groped across the parade floor to the room where the lieutenant had showed him the machine guns and explained their use —to him, commander of a machine-gun platoon through a dozen major battles! He felt around among various types till he laid hands on an old friend, the Browning air-cooled, A-10. He felt it all over, to make sure it was in serviceable order. His army practice of dismantling and assembling them blindfolded stood him in good stead.

He felt around and found plenty of ammunition, a better tripod, and lastly a tarpaulin to wrap the whole outfit in, for if he started down an Edmonton street with a machine gun over his shoulder he was not likely to get far.

At the rear of the armory he unlocked a window, raised it carefully, and jumped out into an alley. In an adjoining plumber shop, a couple workmen, smoking cigarettes on time and a half, heard the jingle of metal and came to the door. Alan flattened himself against a telephone pole. Above him a sign which proclaimed that when better automobiles are built McLaughlin-Buick would build them, was creaking in the light

breeze. Thinking the noise was caused by that swaying sign, the workmen went back to their talk.

A few minutes later, as a taxi sped him toward the Château, Alan mused:

"Too bad there isn't an I. W. W. headquarters in town. By rights Buzzard and I ought to have some bombs, and I don't know where else I could get them."

Gathering all his things at the Château, he whipped on out to the rendezvous arranged with his new-found partner.

Buzzard had put in some busy hours too. He had filled up on gas and oil; had attended to several repairs and replacements; had acquired a pack-chute, new propeller and half a dozen costly flying instruments.

With a couple mechanics whom he had awakened at an all-night garage, he was busy putting on the new prop.

Vaguely suspicious, Alan took him aside and asked quietly:

"Say, Buzzard, how did you get all this equipment? You've got more than a thousand dollars' worth here, and you only had two hundred——"

"I borrowed that stuff temporarily. There's several government planes here, and they had extra equipment."

"*Borrowed* it? Temporarily——?"

"Well, stole it."

"Stole it? *Government property?* Good Lord, man! That's a penitentiary offense. The authorities will dead sure catch on to who took it."

"Yes, I expect they will. At least the night watchman'll know. I invested five dollars in Haig and Haig for him; and he's sleeping it off over behind that

hangar. He'll put them next to us." Buzzard's voice became serious. "But Alan, I couldn't get it any other way. We simply had to have it, or give up our trip."

"Yes, we had to have it," Alan admitted reluctantly. "I guess you did right, Buzzard." But it staggered him to realize that he and his partner were criminals now in the eyes of the law. Their motives would be no excuse. They faced a prison term if caught. And their capture was inevitable: soon or late they would have to show up somewhere.

He could not bring himself to reproach Buzzard. He himself had stolen a machine gun, though he had covered his tracks pretty well; and Buzzard after all had done this for his sake. And he felt that this theft was justified, if ever theft could be. With no chance of personal gain, at heavy cost of their own hard-earned dollars and at risk of their very lives, he and Buzzard were flinging themselves against a pack of murderous criminals.

He said: "We'd better be getting away from Edmonton forthwith. At daylight there'll be people here on the field. It'll be our *finis* if we're not gone."

He began stowing their outfit in the fuselage cubby. Buzzard paid the mechanics, and then with an electric torch he began a final inspection of the plane. Wing-struts, wire, cotter-keys in vital nuts, the control leads, emergency gas tank, the cockpit instruments and whole ignition system—with an expert's patient care he went over the entire plane, grooming it for its long wilderness flight.

They donned their flying togs. Buzzard showed Alan how to put on his pack-chute, how to jump clear in case of disaster and jerk the rip-cord. They climbed in and snapped their safety belts.

Revving up in short order, Buzzard flecked the

throttle, jumped over the chocks, taxied down the field, and gave it the gun.

Just as the first rosy fingers of dawn were reaching up into the eastern sky, they hopped off, left the sleeping city behind them, and roared away into the North.

CHAPTER XIV: IN THE LAND OF MANY WATERS

"Slob-Ice" Jensen was glaring around him at the other five faces in the tent.

"Some of you lubbers," he growled, "ain't got the sense you was borned with. Ain't got sense enough to carry guts to a bear! You gimme a pain with your whining and growling and always wanting to argy about what *I* tell you. Now I'm gonna explain just what's ahead of us and what we gotta do."

The six men were squatting around the walls of their dirty-white tent. They had pinned a blanket over the flap-front to keep out the hordes of mosquitoes, and had stoppered every rent and chink against the torturing insects. The tent, foul and sultry, was filled with a choking blue fog of tobacco smoke. A single caribou-tallow candle, flickering through the haze, played in weird shadows on the bearded faces and outlandish clothes of the six.

With high-power repeating rifles, with long-handled blubber knives and belt-guns two to a man, the place looked like a pirate's den. Some half-raw fish and waterfowl from the last meal were heaped on a greasy tarpaulin. Across one end of the tent lay a row of dirty blankets and sleeping pokes. But the chiefest part of the duffle was half a dozen corded bales of precious fox and dark-brown marten peltry, and four heavy pouches made of stout leather—pouches of gold dust and nuggets.

A drizzling rain beat steadily upon the canvas shelter, but it showed signs of slackening; and Méti André said that tomorrow the weather would fair off and the rainy moon would definitely pass. For more than two weeks now the somber heavens had emptied out a sleety incessant downpour, till the lake level had risen a foot and islets had mostly disappeared and the amphibious Land of Many Waters had become one vast illimitable marsh. Outside, from the flags and quivering bogs, came a dinning chorus of frogs, a flackering of innumerable waterfowl, an audible hum and buzz of insect myrmidons.

The six men were as motley a crew as ever the whaling fleets of Bering's Sea and the Western Arctic could muster up. With one exception the six of them were deck hands—wharf wolves of gutter speech and alley vices; strange men to be camped in the heart of a wilderness that even the Indians seldom penetrated.

There was John Siebielski, a square-faced squat Alaskan, a descendant of the Cossack *Promyshleniki* (fur-hunters) who for generations, when Russia ruled the northwestern shores of America, had held brutal sway over the Aleuts and Kalosh in their lust for peltry.

There was Pete Gonzales, a Sandwich Islander, brown-skinned, his white teeth flashing, his dress gaudy and picturesque. A gentleman Pete was in outward appearance, in speech, in education, but at heart a criminal, a vicious smiling criminal.

There was "Lunnon Dick," a wiry stunted limey, with Battersea accent and quick jerky ways.

There was "Chink" Woolley, a quarter-Chinese, an olive-faced, silent nondescript, with his right arm in sling from Bill Hardsock's bullet. He was very silent and tight of lip, Chink Woolley, as a man is who faces death. Chink was face to face with death and he

knew it. On the escape he would be a drag, a burden, for his arm was shattered beyond all help from splints and bandages. No one had spoken a threatening word to him, but from their ominous silence, from their shifty glances, he knew his fate. When the party broke camp and were on the move again, Jensen was going to stab or shoot him with as little qualm as one thumbs the neck of a trout.

The fifth was a Dogrib *méti* named André, a thin small weasel-like man of fifty. He had just returned from a scouting trip down the Big Alooska.

The six of them were talking, or listening rather to Jensen talk, of final plans to escape. In height and powerful build, in keenness of brain and heavy-handed leadership over the other five, Slob-Ice Jensen towered head and shoulders above his pack. Méti André might be sharper in some ways, but the 'breed lacked drive, backbone, and the courage of his vices. He was a mere pilot on this inland piratical cruise; Jensen was captain. A huge man with huge appetites, red-whiskered, with high forehead and thoughtful eyes, with a body as graceful as a panther's for all his great frame, Jensen was a man of exceptional sagacity and courage. From the very beginning of this robbery business the others had looked to him for leadership. And those scenes on board the steamer—his swift cunning attack, his clockwork plans, his neat escape from those angry rifles when escape seemed utterly hopeless—those scenes were vivid in their memories still.

Echoing the identical line of reasoning which Alan Baker had sketched in Haskell's cabin, Jensen went on: "Some of you wanta go back to the River and git outside thataway. Hell's fire!—you'd mebbe git ten miles afore the Yeller-stripes 'ud grab you off. Some of you wanta go north to the Arctic coast. Whaffor?

No ships to git away on, and the Yeller-stripes've got patrols there to boot. You say, 'Head south.' Yeah—and run into the nest of P'lice posts down there around Athabascy. We can't go south ner west ner north, but we *kin* go east——"

Lunnon Dick spoke up:

"Clear hover t' 'Udson Bay er Manitoba? Two thousand miles haway? That's a bloody long 'ard trot, Slob-Hice."

Jensen turned on him with a fierce anger and withering sarcasm that silenced Lunnon for an hour.

"Sure it's a hellish long hard trot, you runty bilge rat! Don't I know it? But I'd ruther tramp ten thousand miles than do them twenty slow short steps from a hoosegow to a scaffol'!"

The others all nodded emphatically, fearful of Jensen's scorching anger. He was unnecessarily heavy-handed with them. None of the five was really disputing his leadership; they were too completely under his thumb. They were sitting there on a hundred and fifty thousand dollars which *he* had got for them. They owed their very lives to his quick thinking aboard the steamer, when he had pulled their trick out of the fire. And they were leaning on him now to save them from the Mounted and get them out to the oblivion of a big city.

But Jensen knew that strong language would keep them in his power more securely; and just now, in the back of his brain, he had a secret reason for desiring to be absolute overlord of the party. He had in mind a plan, a startling and dangerous plan. The news which 'breed André had brought back from his scouting trip had put this feverish thought into his head, and it had grown upon him till it towered over all his other hopes and secret desires. When he sprang the idea, his

men might rebel, unless he knocked rebellion out of them beforehand.

Saying nothing yet of this new scheme, he went on explaining the escape. "Now, here, all of you—look't here." He smoothed a place on the mud floor; and as the others leaned forward to watch, he drew a rude map with his long thumb nail. "Here's the big River. Here's the Alooska that we come up with the Mounties on our tails. Here's the Thal-Azzay, this round-shaped thing, and over here is the Inconnu watershed, er the Inconnu *haut d'en pays,* as André calls it. On t'other side of 't is the Inconnu River. We'll go over and strike that. It's the only route east. It's an old trade-path atween the Yellerknives and the Rabbit-Eaters——"

" 'Scuse me, Slob-Ice," Siebielski interrupted timidly, "but you say that's a trade-route, the Inconnu. Now, won't they be Smokies comin' and goin' along it? We dassen't be seen. I know how fast their damn moccasin telegraph c'n travel. 'Speerienced it once over by Kotzebue."

"Now that's a sensible question, John. Yeah, Smokies'll be coming and going. But anybody that sees us, that'll just be his damn hard luck! As you say, we dassen't be seen."

Heads nodded. Everyone knew exactly what Jensen meant.

He went on: "We'll follow the Inconnu east a ways and then head south for Manitoby. We'll spend the rest of this summer and fall working down into timber country. Then we'll find some good hiding place and build a couple shacks and lay in meat, and we'll wait there till the break-up. Next spring we'll ease on down and out to Winnipeg, and there we'll be with better'n a hundred and fifty thousand in hides and dust!"

His own personal and private plans after they did

get out to Winnipeg, Jensen did not see fit to disclose. He knew a party there in the Queen City of the Wheat Plains who would buy the furs at two-thirds of their auction value and say "nudding." The dust, being unstamped, could be sold anywhere. He himself, both business manager and leader of this cruise, would naturally attend to those business matters. Once with the money in his pocket, would he split six ways with these lubbers? Or would he take a train and fade out of their lives and have that hundred and fifty thousand for his own sweet own? You bet your life he would!

"When are we going to start, Jensen?" Gonzales inquired, in his precise soft English.

"Pretty soon, Pete. We can't travel s'long as this damn rain keeps up and the flies're so bad. They'd bleed a fellow to death. But the rain's petering out now, and pret' soon we'll get a thunderstorm. First thunder kills 'most all the flies. The mosquitoes'll hang on, but we'll have the tent to camp in; and by putting rocks in front end the canoes and wet moss on 'em and making a smudge, we c'n manage to travel. It's about time any day now to be drifting, ain't it, André?"

The 'breed nodded. In his heart he wished that his party was already on the Inconnu and far down that sluggish uncharted river. He was in trembling fear and dread of Alan Baker. He had never met *"le sergent terrible";* he absolutely never wanted to meet him. He had heard too many stories of grimly successful patrols that struck like avalanches without whisper of warning; of patrols that reached out like long arms into the bush and clutched men unexpectedly.

'Breed André knew, as the others did not, that Baker was the only man they need fear. Few white men, few of the *métis* even, had ever heard of La Rivière Inconnu; but Baker knew where it was. He had led a

patrol there once and nabbed a crony of André's. He might lead another patrol there and lie in wait. On his scouting trip back west André had seen the Yellow-stripes going up and down the Mackenzie at their usual routine work. *Aussi* the patrol had not started yet. 'Breed André could not understand why not, but that did not lessen his fear of *"le sergent terrible."*

To Jensen's suggestion he added: "I t'ink we better go queek. Dees man Baker, he wiser dan carcajou; he steecks to a man-trail like de pine marten on rabbit track—steecks till he makes hees keeling. He mebbe guess we go east to Rivière Inconnu. He mebbe lead patrol dere an' watch. He mebbe waitin' for de t'onner storm to keel flies. I dono. But we better get queeck out of hees country."

With his plans clear now and the men completely under his sway, Jensen leaned back against a *paqueton* of furs and lit a fresh pipe.

There was one other project, his secret dangerous scheme, that he wanted to broach; but first he must make up his own mind about it—whether he dared to carry it through.

So he sat quiet, smoking, thinking.

He guessed that for once the Police were altogether baffled. They must be pounding their heads to explain who he and his men were, where they had come from, how they had got into this country, unknown, unseen; and how they, complete strangers, knew the ins and outs of this northern wilderness as well as the Police themselves. He thought of them as a pack of hounds circling frantically to pick up a scent. It was pleasing to know he had out-maneuvered them from start to finish. A man who could beat the Yellow-stripes would

have no trouble at all dodging the Provincial Police and town cops.

But this reflection was only on the surface of his thoughts. He was thinking of the MacMillan Trading Post. 'Breed André had said that Dave MacMillan was not there. Jensen shrewdly guessed where the trader was. From the MacMillan girl being alone at the post, except for that white-whiskered old coot, Jensen guessed that Dave MacMillan had got into trouble over that pack of otter furs in the storage shed.

Through the tobacco haze Jensen looked back across six years and saw again all the details of a certain incident between himself and Joyce MacMillan. He had re-lived that incident a thousand times since it happened. The memory of it, the memory of that laughing-eyed girl, had come down across the years like the scent of fresh violets. There had been times when the haunting recollection of her had toned down his coarse language and made him want to be different from the man he was, so that he might look up to her. But that frail ethereal memory was no match for the dusky beings, the gross impulses, that swayed and controlled him.

Two weeks ago when his party passed the MacMillan Trading Post, the place had seemed deserted. But he had known she lived there; and drawn by some overpowering impulse to see her, to be near her again, he had flung caution and hot haste to the winds, and stopped, and gone ashore. He had gone up to the house, had looked through a window into a small room furnished with chair, table, bed, dresser; its roughness softened by lace curtains, pennants, and colored cuts from magazines.

The picture of that MacMillan girl asleep in there, an arm under her head, a great-spurred violet in her

hair—that flesh-and-blood reincarnation of her former memory had been a madness in his blood ever since. It had overshadowed his waking thoughts, had flitted across his dreams, had been present with him even during the hot battle with the three Mounties at the edge of Many Waters.

The news which 'breed André had brought back—that Joyce was practically alone at the trading post, scarcely two days travel away, that the trading had dwindled and few Indians or *métis* came now, that the Officer Commanding at Fort Endurance was giving her no protection whatsoever—this news to Jensen was like a match to a barrel of powder.

Half-drunk with success of his daring robbery, he felt all the boldness of a new-fledged criminal who has long inhibited his impulses, but has finally broken loose and scored decisively. And with impunity. The law was not so infallible as it was cracked up to be.

Besides, Jensen was thinking: "Hell, we got robbery and murder ag'inst us now! Can't kick up a worse stink than that, I guess. If we're caught we'll hang anyway!"

His deliberate brain saw danger in his scheme; but he had risked death for the furs and gold, and that hundred and fifty thousand was far less vivid, less tangible, less impassioning to him than the memory of that moment when he stood looking through Joyce's window. He had spent a year on a whaler without getting back to port; a year of exile in Alaskan mountains, among prospectors. . . . There are hungers more powerful than the hunger for food or gold. . . .

As his aching mind dwelt on this prospect, fairly within his hands if he dared take it, he suddenly saw how he could turn the very disappearance of that MacMillan girl into a masterstroke for himself and his men. By capturing her he would *actually aid their es-*

cape. Suppose he forced her to write a note and leave it at the post, saying that she and the old lace-curtain coot were going to some lake to hunt or fish. Suppose the Police found that note, and wondered why she hadn't come back. What would they do? Why, they'd fling out a search patrol. They'd hunt for days, for weeks, to find her. Just when he and his men were getting beyond the Inconnu, those Yellow-stripes, thrown entirely off the scent, would be combing some country hundreds of miles away!

It would be ridiculously easy, he reasoned, to knock the old coot on the head and take the defenseless girl. They would land above the station and creep upon it through the bush. Two of his men would go in peacefully, as though to trade, and watch their chance to seize her. His party could swoop, strike, and have the whole thing over with in ten minutes.

His fancy went on beyond the capture, the escape, the long trek across the Great Barrens, through the Manitoba Strong-Woods, down to Winnipeg. He would be firm with the MacMillan girl, but kind too. He would not break her spirit or cause her to hate him. She would come to like him, all right, long before the trip ended. She would come to see how masterly he was, lording it over the rest of the party, strong-handed to protect her from the others. And there was the matter of that hundred and fifty thousand. . . . He would let her know his plans to sidetrack these five lubbers and have that fortune all for himself and her! After her hardships at that bleak trading post, after she saw a few of the things which that fortune could buy for the two of them . . . Oh, she'd be willing enough in time, and would nestle beside him contentedly, somewhere down in sunnier latitudes where it was summertime all the year.

No more sleety decks and icy rigging and toiling hours in a whale boat. No more bucking slob-ice or spanking for your life out from between two grinding packs. No more horny-handed skippers to "Yes-sir," or wharf wolves to knock respect into, or man-killing work at fifty a month, with nothing to look forward to but a squint-eyed Eskimo woman and a drunk on rotgut *houtchini* every half-year or so. . . .

Knocking the ashes from his pipe, he leaned forward:

"Men, I got an idee. I just showed you lubbers our one chance to 'scape. Now I'm gonna show you how we c'n make our getaway dead sure and certain. How we c'n tie them Yeller-stripes up in a sack and throw away the key. Anybody objecting? Anybody wanting to kick over the traces?"

Glaring around him, he saw emphatic denials. The men were hanging upon his words; he knew they would obey him without a whimper of protest.

He went on, "We're going to make a little sachay down the Alooska to MacMillan's trading post. We're going to do it tomorrow. We'll rap that old duffer on the head and take the girl. We'll throw them Yeller-stripes clear off the scent. While they're hunting for her, we'll be making tracks southeast to Manitoby. Y'mind how we saved our skins on the steamer by taking that other skirt? We'll do it again; but we'll carry this'n on along with us. No one'll ever know what happened to her. . . ."

CHAPTER XV : A DEADLY TRAP

For a few days after Alan Baker bought out of service and left Fort Endurance, Inspector Haskell enjoyed more peace and security than he had felt in many months. Realizing in his secret thoughts that he was a raw newcomer in this North, he had all along harbored a fear that the brilliant sergeant might supplant him and be commissioned and become O. C. again at this coveted post. But that fear was dead now. Baker was out, and out for good. As far as the Mounted was concerned, he had committed suicide.

And the post was running smoothly enough. Bill Hardsock and Pedneault, experienced northern men, were carrying on the work without a hitch. Dave MacMillan had been sent up river in irons to stand trial in an Edmonton court. Burgoon was catching on to the simpler duties around the post. Whipple, now an acting corporal, was doing a fair job—with Bill's suggestions—at compiling the Indian census; and the two detachments afield were to be recalled shortly.

But after that first satisfaction wore away, it gradually occurred to Haskell that maybe he ought to make some move to capture those six bandits. To let them escape without raising a hand against them would look bad, very bad, to Superintendent Williamson on his coming visit to the post. It was not enough merely to kill off a dangerous enemy. He ought to entrench himself by some positive action.

Thinking over his situation, he remembered how

Baker had demanded to lead a patrol to the Inconnu River and lie in wait there. Baker had said they would try to escape by that route. He knew what he was talking about. Haskell realized he knew. For months he had watched the ex-sergeant's work with all the close scrutiny of a man eager to pounce upon a reportable fault. He had found none to pounce upon, and Baker's uncanny wisdom about the Alooska patrol had driven the realization home and clenched it.

If Baker said those bandits would escape by the Inconnu, then they were likely to do just that; and a patrol would stand excellent chances of nailing the six of them.

Should he send a detail to the Inconnu?

The more Haskell pondered the idea, the more it appealed to him. It was reasonably sure to succeed. It would be the positive action he needed. Such an accomplishment would decidedly be a feather in his cap. Baker, with all his reputation for man-hunting wizardry, had failed to capture those outlaws. Baker, the best of the northern men, *"le sergent terrible,"* had miserably failed. "But Haskell got them——" Haskell could hear the talk of the whole Mounted. "He nabbed them after Baker made a mess of it. No Springheel Johnny about that officer!"

It would be neat, deucedly neat, Haskell chuckled, to turn the ex-sergeant's plan to his own personal advantage!

On his wall map he hunted for the Inconnu. He found a small channel of the Mackenzie by that name, but Baker's Inconnu was some large river. Perhaps the chart listed it as "The Unknown," the English translation of the name. He searched for an Inconnu and an Unknown, but found neither. Such a stream simply was not shown on his map.

Stepping over to the mission hospital, he brushed aside Father Claverly's objections and grilled Larry Younge, who lay there just out of the shadow of death —weak, gaunt, a pitiful wreck of his former self.

In a general way Larry knew where the Inconnu was; Alan had once drawn a sand-bar map and showed him. But he saw Haskell's motive, and he vowed with all his feeble strength that the inspector was not going to steal Alan Baker's thunder. He was too mindful of Alan pushing him ashore in a water-logged canoe, of the patrols he and Baker had made together, of Baker's big-hearted friendliness to the men under him. And Larry nursed an unrelenting vengeance against the man who had busted him and humiliated him with squaw work, and whose incompetent orders were the cause of his being crippled for life.

Larry informed him that the Inconnu was named after a whitefish which swarmed in its sluggish depths; that the Indians used it as a trade-route because they were assured of food through that desolate country. But that was all Larry saw fit to tell. During that half-hour of merciless grilling, whenever Haskell tried to pin him down to miles and directions, Larry's lips would tighten and he would grunt:

"Un't know nothing more about it."

Bill Hardsock proved an even tougher nut to crack. Bill knew that he himself would have to lead the patrol, and just now he did not wish to leave the Endurance country: he wanted to watch after Joyce, and he had a tryst to keep with Alan. Besides, he knew that Alan himself was on the trail of those men and in all likelihood would run them to earth for a show-down battle. Bill felt as Larry did about Haskell stealing Alan's thunder.

"You'd naturally command the detachment," Has-

kell tried to bribe him. "And if you're successful . . . You know there's a vacant sergeancy here."

"But I don't know where the Inconnu is, sir."

Haskell's temper, rather uncertain these days because of his desperation about Elizabeth, flared out at Bill.

"The hell you don't know! You went along with Baker on a patrol there once! Baker told me that you and he made that patrol!"

For a moment Bill was on his beam-ends. Then he lied valiantly: "I did make that patrol, but it's been four years ago, and there's half a hundred rivers between here and there. I don't know the route at all."

Haskell flourished an ugly threat. "Corporal, you know where that river is. You know how to get there. You're withholding information. That's the grossest kind of insubordination. You'll tell me where that river is and take a patrol there according to orders, or I'll reduce you and give you a c.b. sentence you won't soon forget!"

"Then you'll have to bust me and confine me to barracks," Bill stood his ground doggedly. "I don't want to start out with a patrol unless I know where I'm going and how to get there. Alan Baker was the only person that knowed. Now if he was here——"

"Thattledo. Get out!"

The next day, when Little Otter came in to the post for a supply of chewing *stemmo,* Haskell pumped him. The sub-chief had only the haziest idea where the Inconnu was, but Indian-like he would not admit his ignorance. He started talking, gesticulating. He buzzed Haskell's ears with a water-dogging jargon about portages, *décharges, embarques,* debouches and schneys; rivers, creeks, muskegs, heights of land, chains of lakes; so many "pipes" this way and "suns" that way

—till Haskell caught him in a flat self-contradiction and kicked him out of the cabin in angry disgust.

The Inconnu patrol therefore blew up. There was nothing Haskell could do about capturing those bandits. He knew that if Williamson asked why no move had been made, the short-handedness at the post would be at least some excuse. Besides, one of the other detachments, over on Hudson's Bay or southeast in the Reindeer Lake country, would probably nail those bandits and the affair would blow over.

Those rainy imprisoning days, as he sat in his cabin and looked out along the slope for a mere glimpse of Elizabeth Spaulding, he was tortured by the question of why she was still here, and what stood between her and Baker. Why had Baker bought out in such hot haste and left this North country that was his home? Was Elizabeth waiting for him, or had they split up?

Sometimes it seemed to Haskell that his appointment to this northern post had not been a mere vagary of luck but a manifest act of destiny, that he might meet Elizabeth Spaulding. His triumph over Baker, his commission as a Mounted officer, his career in the Mounted—what did the whole of it weigh as against the prospect of losing Elizabeth after he had found her? With the sincerity of the only passionate love in his life, he felt that if Baker married her and took her away, his victory over the ex-sergeant would be a grinning mockery.

Late one quiet evening, when Bill Hardsock was gone on patrol, he saw Elizabeth go up the slope to the cabin which had been Baker's, and light the candles there, and after a quarter-hour come away again. Tripping down the grassy terrace to Mrs. Drummond's flower garden, she sat down alone by the edge of it.

The dim whiteness of her dress in the twilight, the

thought of her sitting there by herself, was a madness in Haskell's blood. The racking uncertainty of her relations with Alan Baker grew unbearable as he paced his darkened cabin. Glancing through the window at that dim figure, he debated whether to go out to her. She had cut him so sharply after Baker left that he had not dared seek her company. But with that question goading him, he had grown desperate. She was alone there in the twilight. . . . She might talk with him. . . .

There was something he wanted to tell her—important radiogram news which he had received two days ago. That would be excuse for going.

He went out of his lonesome cabin and out along the twilight slope toward her. . . .

Under pretense of tidying up Alan's cabin, Elizabeth had gone there to see if she could discover any letters, notes or information as to what Alan was doing.

Of his purpose she knew only that he was trying to run those bandits to earth. Their escape had stung him and aroused him to some tremendous effort to retrieve that disaster; and as his final gesture he was flinging himself against them lone-handed. But he had gone south, out of the Three Rivers country, for a trader had reported seeing him at Fort Smith hurrying on to Steel-End. Her curiosity was aroused. How under heaven did he expect to get those men by going out to Edmonton?

She had ransacked the cabin thoroughly but found not the slightest clue.

At first she had been nettled at him for leaving her here and shutting her out of his plans and wasting weeks trying to run down some criminals. But then came word of the ten-thousand-dollar reward offered by the two fur companies and the A-A Transport for

capture of the men and recovery of the loot. When she heard of that, Elizabeth changed her mind. Alan was a civilian now; he could accept that reward. Ten thousand dollars, she reflected, would permit them a long honeymoon at fashionable Banff and set them up properly in a chic apartment and give her a trip to New York to purchase clothes.

In her contemplation of clothes, honeymoon, trips, she hardly gave a thought to all the toil, the peril of death, the fearful uncertainty of Alan's venture. She never doubted but that he would make the capture. She fancied him walking into the bandit camp, arresting them, bringing them in, all in a very formal and easy manner. The possibility of him failing, the picture of him lying in some Thal-Azzah bog with a bullet through his heart as the end of his great quest, never entered her mind. She felt confident of the ten thousand, and quite content to wait.

In the past year there had been times when she was uncertain of Alan and uneasy about her hold upon him. For all her cleverness in personal relationships, she could not quite understand his attitude toward her. True enough, she was the sister of his dead partner; he was friendly, protective, and always a staunch refuge. But he was not infatuated with her. Passion seemed almost entirely lacking in him, and at times he seemed to be looking back at his friendship with Joyce MacMillan. Knowing nothing of the secret truth, of the circumstances mighty enough to tear him away from Joyce, she had been greatly bewildered at first. Later she had come to accept the fact, let the motive be what it might. During her wait now, she felt no doubt whatsoever that he would come for her or send for her. He had promised to do that, and she knew what a promise from Alan Baker meant.

That evening, when she saw Haskell coming toward her in the twilight, she started to rise up and go into her room. It was not wise to permit the inspector's company. If Mrs. Drummond ever got a chance, she would be sure to tattle about it to Alan. Besides, she had no wish to talk with Haskell; she had definitely put him out of mind, now that her marriage to Alan was a certainty.

Hat in hand, Haskell came up and stood before her. With cold sardonic eyes she surveyed him, amused at his humility. Toward her the man had no pride left.

She reminded him sharply: "I believe I asked you not to talk with me again."

"Yes, you did," he said humbly. "I haven't forgotten. It's made these last couple weeks pretty miserable. But when I saw you over there to-night . . . Elizabeth, won't you let me—can't I stay just a little while?"

Elizabeth started to refuse him curtly, but a thought checked her. Haskell had been superior toward her when he first came. He had several times made remarks about her being engaged to a non-com. She wanted to sting him for that and sting him hard.

As he sat down, with eyes fervently intent on her, she asked him, aloof and cool:

"Was there something special you wanted to talk about? Or did you just——?"

"Well, no—I mean, yes, there was. I got some news day before yesterday that cut me up pretty bad. . . ." He waited for her to comment, but she said nothing. "You remember last winter I said my father was in poor health? I got a radiogram night before last about —about him."

Elizabeth understood that his father had died. She

was quite well aware that Haskell was not exactly stricken by the news, though he was trying to play upon her sympathy. He had always referred to his father as "the governor" or "the old gentleman," with little filial respect.

She wondered why Haskell was discussing the matter with her now.

As he went on talking of it, she began to see his reason. He mentioned the big country estate outside of Cobham, the town house in Ottawa, the extensive and valuable timber limits up the Kiamiki. When he hinted at himself being the only heir and the owner of all this, she saw his whole drift.

The news left her entirely cold. From his treatment of Alan she knew how tricky and dishonorable he could be. He was trying to bait her. . . . She smiled sardonically at him for being so crude about it. She remembered all too well his thinly-veiled references, when he first came and wanted to dazzle her, about his year in Paris and his affairs in Vienna and Madrid. She had never forgotten his covert hints to her, last December, that she needn't be dependent on Alan Baker if she didn't want to be.

Probably he thought to make her his *Ottawa* mistress.

The affections of such a man were evanescent at best, and certainly quicksand to build upon. Imagining her relations with this man if she ever allowed herself to become dependent on him, she saw him staving off marriage by the old threadbare dodges, and at last turning coldly away when passion went. Alan Baker in time would go farther than Haskell and his Cobham estate. Alan was every way more a man. He was honest, he could be depended upon.

Angry and contemptuous, she rose up, aware that

Mrs. Drummond was watching from a bedroom window.

"I've got to go. But there's something I really must thank you for, inspector."

"To thank *me* for?" He too had risen; he was leaning toward her eagerly. "I'm glad . . . I didn't know I'd done——"

"You didn't *intend* it as a favor. But it was." With mocking irony in her tones she went on: "Last winter Alan was offered a very splendid position in Victoria. I wanted him to take it. You used to say he was a noncom with no prospects, and that was somewhat as I felt. He didn't want to leave. He wanted to stay in service and live here in the North. Just when he was wavering, *you* forced his hand. You made him buy out, and so you made our marriage possible. I'm awfully grateful to you, really. You didn't realize what a favor you were doing."

"Wh-aa-tt!" Haskell jerked erect as though he had been slapped. "You—*you wanted him out of the Mounted?* You're glad he—glad I demoted . . . *I* made your marriage to him possible . . . ?" His voice choked.

"It will be in just a few weeks. We've already arranged it for Edmonton, and our wedding trip for the Blackfoot Selkirks." She intoned coolly: "That is what I've been wanting to tell you, inspector. And now, what time I'm still here, I'd like you, please, not to come around or force your company on me."

She left him standing there, staring after her, dazed and speechless.

That same evening, only an hour later, Haskell made a discovery so startling that in some measure it took his tortured thoughts away from Elizabeth.

A combination of circumstances, each of them innocent enough in itself, opened his eyes to what Alan Baker was doing.

Sitting at his desk, watching the candle glow of Elizabeth's window, he was cursing himself for his blindness. He had forced Baker out of the Mounted —the very thing Elizabeth wanted! *He* had made their marriage inevitable. He had tried to crush Baker and swing Elizabeth from him, and his act had boomeranged upon himself!

He was convulsed with fury against Baker—a lashing venomous fury. God! if he could only stop that marriage! If he could only recall what he had done. But Baker was gone, Baker was forever out of his power.

A knock sounded on the door, and Whipple came in with a report.

"Sir, last week I missed fifty gallons of gas and five of oil from our stores. I thought it might be a paper mistake, but today I checked up again and we're short still more."

"Well, what about it?" Haskell snapped.

"Nothing, sir; nothing at all," Whipple said hastily. He saw that his chief was in a vicious mood, and he backed away to the door. "I just thought that you would like to know, sir. Most likely some half-breed with an outboard motor is stealing this, sir." And he closed the door quietly.

Alone again, unable to bear his stinging thoughts and the mocking sight of that candle glow so near, so inaccessible, Haskell turned in desperation to the service radio set in an effort to distract himself. As he had done on evenings past, he picked up an Edmonton station which sometimes sent out flashes to the Three

River posts when the powerful station at Pittsburg was busy with the Arctic and Eastern divisions.

Among the orders, news and personal messages, he heard that an aviator named Featherof and another man, name unknown, had stolen a machine gun, a propeller, pack-chute, flying instruments and other things at Edmonton; and escaping in Featherof's monoplane, had last been sighted following the Alberta and Great Waterways Railroad toward McMurray. The posts were warned to be on the look-out for the plane and to arrest the criminals on sight.

The name and description of Featherof meant nothing to Haskell, but the description of the other person made him thoughtful. Tall, rangy, sandy-haired, gray-eyed, with a long prominent scar across his left temple —that description would fit Alan Baker to a dot. And Baker had gone south and might conceivably have reached Edmonton.

Haskell pondered this possibility a minute and then dismissed it. There were probably a lot of men who fitted that description. Those two fellows likely were whisky smugglers to the Swampy Crees, or some small-time timber men in a feud of some sort; and the plane would never come this far north.

It was Bill Hardsock who innocently opened his eyes to the whole truth.

Knocking, entering, standing before the desk, Bill requested:

"Sir, if you don't mind, I've got three days free time coming to me, and if you don't mind I'd like to take them now. I'd like to have them in a row, if you don't mind——"

"I'm short of men as it is," Haskell cut him off. "You can't go."

"But, sir," Bill pleaded, "I've been saving them up for months. I haven't had a day since Christmas."

"I said you can't go. That's that!"

It wasn't "that" for Bill. Refusing to be driven out, he planted himself there wide-legged and pleaded for his three days—pleaded till Haskell saw that the corporal must have some special and urgent reason for wanting off duty.

"Are you getting married?" he demanded sarcastically.

"No, sir," Bill answered, with more outward respect than he had ever shown before. "I—I want to—go trout fishing."

Haskell angered. He started to order Bill out of the cabin on penalty of c. b. But then he suddenly checked himself, he half-rose from his chair, gasping, with a revelation volting through his brain.

There it was—the whole crashing truth! Baker's strange haste to buy out, his strange journey out to civilization, that plane coming north, the missing gasoline, Bill Hardsock's request for a leave of absence. . . . All these disjoined facts suddenly clicked together like the parts of a Chinese puzzle.

That man wanted in Edmonton *had been Baker!* He was coming back in a plane to get those bandits! Hardsock was stealing gas and oil for the machine to maneuver on! He needed these three days of absence in order to take the fuel out to the rendezvous!

Wanting time to think, time to make the right move, Haskell said jerkily: "Just a—a minute, corporal. I'll have to . . . I want to consider your request." And he turned away to the window.

So Baker had not given up! He was out of service, but he was coming back *to finish with those bandits.*

Haskell's knowledge of Baker's grim persistent nature and the man's uncanny wisdom in a wilderness manhunt, whispered to him: "And he'll corner them, too! He'll run those men down! He's going to have a showdown fight with them."

For a moment he was staggered by the man's superb daring. For a moment, forgetting personal scores between himself and Baker, he felt an admiration for this magnificent attempt.

Then, as he saw deeper into the consequences of this feat, his admiration darkened and flickered out. How would it look for the ex-sergeant to capture or kill those men, or at least corner them and go down fighting? What would the higher officials have to say about that? He could fairly hear them asking why one man had achieved a thing which an inspector with a detachment had not even attempted? He heard the invidious comparison, "What were you doing all the while Baker was running those men to earth?"

As he stood there, cogently aware of that candle light out along the slope and of a girlish figure moving against the glow of it, all his hatred and jealousy of Baker flared up. Not only was this man going to marry the girl he loved; this relentless sergeant, rising out of a crushing defeat, was going to show him up and make his very name a joke throughout the Force.

"You are instructed—" he still heard those crackling words flashing up across the wilderness from Edmonton—"to capture that plane and to arrest those criminals on sight." Baker was a criminal, a wanted man, subject to arrest, certain of a penitentiary sentence! Somewhere to the south he was flying up across the latitudes. He had a rendezvous somewhere with Hardsock.

Hardsock could be trailed to that meeting-place!

The plane could be captured, Baker arrested, sent up for a term. . . .

Presently Haskell turned around, smiling pleasantly. Bill should have been warned by the change in him and by his delay over so simple a matter as a leave of absence. Bill should have guessed that the inspector was suspicious and had a deadly counterstroke in mind.

Haskell said agreeably: "I was disgruntled about something when you first came in, corporal. You really have patrolled hard for several months. I'm sorry I snapped at you. You can have your three days off whenever you like. You want to start tomorrow?" And when Bill nodded eagerly: "Very well, I'll throw in the rest of this evening, too. By the way, when you go past barracks ask Whipple to step down here."

"Snakes!" Bill breathed to himself, as he thanked Haskell and went out the door. "That Spring-heel Johnny must be winding up to ask a favor of me, or something. He loves me only a little bit less'n he did Alan. When he uses that kind of handsome language on me, there's a squirrel up the tree. But it's a gin-damn I care what; I've got my three days to help Alan out. Lord, I hope Alan shows up during my free time. He might maybe let me go along on his trick."

With no suspicion of the ugly truth, he hurried up the twilight slope.

When Whipple came in, Haskell ordered him to close the door and pull down the window, to guard against possible eavesdropping. Then he tersely explained the situation. He added:

"Hardsock will probably steal some more gasoline and oil tonight. What he's already stolen isn't enough for a plane to do much maneuvering on. I want you to watch him stealing that stuff so that you can later be a

witness. He refused to help me on that Inconnu patrol. I'll soak him and soak him hard.

"He'll probably have time to take those drums only a couple miles from here tonight. Tomorrow he'll take all of it on to the place where he's to meet Baker. He's been sneaking it away little by little when he had the chance, and hiding it close by; but during his three days he'll take it to the meeting place.

"You might not be able to shadow Hardsock yourself. He's pretty cunning; on work like this he might give you the slip. We'll guard against that. You go down to the river-bank now to those two tepees and get that Indian called Ogi-Tomax. He's an older man, a pretty sly mink. You remember Hardsock thrashed him one time last winter for carrying a squaw-club and beating his wife. He's got a grudge against Hardsock, he'll have a personal interest in this, he's just the man we want. Take a carton of my cigarettes with you and a little rum as a silence present. I'll personally pay him five dollars a day. Do you understand so far?"

Whipple nodded. Haskell went on:

"You and the Indian are to shadow Hardsock tonight and tomorrow. Find out where he's taking that stuff and where he's going to meet Baker. As soon as you do that, whip back here and report to me."

Whipple left. He did not return that whole night. Sleepless, fearful that Hardsock had given them the slip, Haskell sat in his darkened cabin, smoking cigarettes incessantly as he waited through the interminable hours.

It was late the next evening before Whipple returned. He came back tired, bedraggled, but with electric news.

He and the Indian had watched Bill steal more gas and oil from the stores. They had shadowed him to the

temporary cache two miles up the Mackenzie. There he had loaded his canoe to the gunwales with the drums and cans, and had taken them all to a big lake twenty miles on up the river.

He had cached the fuel on a headland called Goose Point; and was waiting there without the faintest suspicion that he had been trailed and was being watched. The Indian, lying low back in the willows, was keeping an eye on him. Even if Hardsock did get suspicious, he hadn't the slightest chance in the world of escaping now. He was defenseless; he had left his guns at the post. He and the precious supplies were bagged already.

Haskell knew where Goose Point was; he had gone shooting there several times last fall. As he listened to the report, he forgot the haggard day and night just passed. He had scarcely dared hope for such news as this.

After careful thought, guarding against any slip-up, he ordered Whipple: "Go get your rifle and belt-gun. I'll take mine too. We'll go up there in the launch. You can drive it. We'll capture Hardsock and those supplies. He hasn't any weapons, and the Indian already has the drop on him. We'll have him boxed there on that headland. We'll make him prisoner. That'll be that. Then we'll wait there. The plane'll be along in a couple days. We'll keep the launch in cover close by. When the machine lights down and they go ashore to get the supplies, we'll ram it and put it out of commission. Then we'll have Baker and this Featherof—and we'll put them where the dogs won't bite 'em!"

As he prepared for the trip, Haskell kept glancing across the terrace at Mrs. Drummond's house, at Elizabeth's window and the candle glow of her bedroom. Through his mind that wireless flash was running,

"Capture that plane . . . arrest those criminals on sight . . . hold them without bond . . . federal charges——"

After his despair of their last week, after his helpless festering anger at Baker, it was a new lease on hope to know he was going to smash Baker's venture and throw him into prison and make that marriage impossible! Baker was walking all unknowingly into a deadly trap. Walking into arrest and criminal disgrace and prison. He would be lucky to get off with a sentence of two years. That was the statute minimum for his offense.

Where was his Victoria job now? Where was that marriage, and that wedding trip in the Selkirks?

As he thought of the deadly trap, it hardly seemed actual that he at last had Baker in his power. But sober judgment told him otherwise. He foresaw the plane lighting at the rendezvous, nearly out of gas. Saw Baker and this Featherof aviator going ashore. Saw himself and Whipple ramming the plane, disabling it, and then making prisoners of those two defenseless, stranded men.

Buckling on his belt-gun, he snuffed the candles and went out of his cabin—on the easiest, most exultant, most deadly-certain trip he had ever made.

CHAPTER XVI: WINGS OVER THE WILDERNESS

ON THAT first day of flight, as dawn broke full and the sun chased away a layer of gossamer clouds beneath the White Speedair, Alan looked down with marveling eyes at a strange panorama. Evergreen forestry, silvery lakes and silvery network of rivers far below, swam past at a speed to amaze him. In thirty minutes he was covering a distance which would take a whole day's hard traveling by canoe or *komatik*.

A new strange feeling of the earth's smallness came over him. He felt an exultation, a smashing triumph over his two old enemies, time and distance. He would not have to skulk like a muskrat through the flags, as he and Bill had done, or use flushing waterfowl as a periscope, or creep along at a snail's pace in a paddle canoe.

As he looked down at the railroad and remembered his fears about getting a machine and pilot, he felt that the worst difficulty of his whole plan had been whipped away like a puff of smoke. He had found a plane, had found a pilot-partner with nerve enough to tackle as dubious and dangerous a venture as two mortals ever embarked upon.

Following the Alberta and Great Waterways Railroad two hundred miles north, they cut west over the Thickwood Hills to avoid McMurray and the Police post at Fort McKay. Keeping far west of the Athabasca, they winged on up across the northern Alberta wilderness till they struck the beautiful Peace near

Vermilion. There they secured gas from an isolated trading post; and after resting a few hours from their four-hundred-mile hop, they took off again and headed for the western end of Great Slave.

Knowing that if he and Buzzard showed up at a Police post or larger trading center, it would mean a quick and sorry end of their flight, Alan planned to avoid such places religiously. He had a conviction that he and Buzzard were "wanted." They had left too many tracks in Edmonton—clues that would speedily be followed up. The Police there, a wise live outfit, had certainly connected them with the theft of all that government property and had radioed instructions for their arrest.

Eventually he and Buzzard were going to be caught. It was as inevitable as sunset. Soon or late they would have to return to civilization and face the music. To Alan the worst of it was that Buzzard was going to pay a heavy price for helping him on this thankless job. For himself he did not greatly care; he hardly thought of it. . . . He was headed north again, on his last patrol, his greatest patrol.

Halfway to Great Slave, when they were winging over an immense region of beaver swamp and tamarack muskeg, a leak in a fuel pipe drained all their gas; and without warning, the motor konked and died. Lacking altitude to switch on the emergency tank and start the engine, Buzzard was forced to make a dead-stick landing on a little duck pond.

In the clumsy canvas canoe, threading tributary creeks out to Buffalo River, Alan made a fifty-mile trip of driving toil and hardship to reach a post and bring back gas.

As they worked on north, they made moderately good time, but only by incessant care and worry. En-

gine trouble caused them delay. Again and again they sat down on some unknown river or lake and sweated for hours over the old motor. Fuel was a constant problem. Avoiding Mounted detachments and Royal Signal Corps stations like the plague, they dared stop only at wilderness-buried posts where radios were unlikely and no Police handy. They could never be certain of getting fuel, and what they did get was usually half kerosene.

Alan was looking forward to his rendezvous with Bill as the end of all this worry about gas and oil. Besides the fuel there at Goose Point, Bill had promised to cache some supplies up the Alooska near Joyce's home.

Beyond the Slave, in the Mackenzie country, the nights rapidly dwindled with the climbing latitudes; they now were merely a couple hours of semi-darkness that did not halt flight. The drizzly rains were ceasing. Thunderstorms, driving eastward out of the Rockies, swept the country. Flies that were killed by the thunder lay in tiny windrows around the lake edges. Back in his own country again, Alan was fervently looking ahead to meeting Bill at En Traverse Lake, to getting those precious supplies, to seeing Joyce again there on the Big Alooska.

On this long trip, like stepping back from a picture to see it better, he had remembered a hundred little incidents connected with Joyce; and they had given him a profounder insight into her nature. He saw her setting a meal for his hungry men that night he went past on patrol. Remembered her valiant return, a brave little soldier, to that lonely and dangerous trading post, that she might be of real aid in the battle for her father. All his loyalty to the sister of his dead partner could not keep him from comparing Joyce's vital

spirited personality with Elizabeth's leisure-bored *ennui,* and Joyce's two years of heroic sacrifice with Elizabeth's idle deliberate dependence.

When he thought of Joyce refusing his kiss, and then of Elizabeth's willingness to give herself to him that night in his cabin, he saw with brutal clarity the difference, the abysmal difference, between those two girls.

On their last evening, worn out by a day of engine trouble and head winds and blinding rains, they alighted in a little spruce-buried lake on Silvertip River, a short hundred miles south of Fort Endurance. Anchoring the plane, they paddled ashore, cooked a warm meal, and rolled up in their blankets for a few hours of desperately-needed rest.

"Tomorrow's the day of days," Buzzard remarked, thinking of the supplies and a base to maneuver from.

"It's the day of days," Alan agreed, but he was thinking of Joyce running down the path, bareheaded in the sun, to greet them. Tomorrow he would know if she was safe. Tomorrow, after the rendezvous with Bill, the White Speedair would be dropping down upon the Big Alooska.

Buzzard was asleep almost instantly, but Alan could not close his eyes. There was a battle he had to fight out, a battle within himself. His nearness to Fort Endurance, the imminency of his meeting Joyce, seemed to have brought all that struggle to a head.

Tossing in a useless attempt to sleep, he finally got up, built a tiny fire, and sat beside it, thinking, a dead pipe in his teeth.

As he sat there under the solemn spruces, he tried to look steadily at his looming marriage to Elizabeth, and decide his course. No longer blinded by idealiza-

tion of her as a girl, he saw now, with pitiless insight, that all along she had not wanted him unless he had a good income and was out of the North. She might love him as well as she had ever loved anybody; but to her he was not greatly more than a means of getting what she wanted out of life. As his wife she would be willful, nagging, selfish, and eternally insistent about money.

The prospect of marrying her, when his respect was gone, made Alan wince. And his respect was gone with a vengeance. Those moments in the cabin, when she offered herself to him, had been a shock and revelation. She had acted not out of excusable passion, not out of love, but as a guarantee that he would take that Victoria job. He thought of the incident with something of revulsion.

Now he was groping to see the honest and righteous thing for him to do. He had talked over many a trouble with Father Claverly, but this was a question no man could help him answer. He wondered whether it would be courage, or a weak yielding to desire, for him to break with Elizabeth and sweep aside the obligations binding him. There was right on both sides. Elizabeth was waiting for him; he had promised to marry her and take her out; he had burned his bridges and committed himself to that Victoria job. Yet it was wrong to enter a loveless marriage that would bring tragic unhappiness. It was wrong to marry Elizabeth when his whole-hearted respect and love went out to Joyce MacMillan.

In the lonely anguish of his thoughts last night, he laid his decision more or less in the hands of time. He felt he must see Joyce again before he could take a decisive step. If he did capture those six criminals and so cleared her father, she would be grateful with

all her heart. He meant to tell her about the tragic happening which had bound him to Elizabeth. If he could win back that old intimate comradeship with her and they could begin anew, then the righteous thing was to put Joyce's happiness above Elizabeth's. He was in a mood to sweep motives aside and take circumstances into his own hands.

CHAPTER XVII : AT EN TRAVERSE

A LITTLE after gray dawn Alan re-built the fire, cooked breakfast, and reluctantly awakened his partner.

Later, when they skirled out to the plane, Buzzard glanced at the tanks and remarked tersely:

"I hope your buddy, this Hardsock, has got some gas and oil out to that lake. It'll be our finish if he hasn't."

"You couldn't make it on north to the Alooska in case something *did* happen to Bill? It's a couple hundred miles from En Traverse to Joyce's home."

"If you could crawl out on the nose of this plane and twist that prop about eighteen hundred times a minute, we'd make it to the Alooska. But if you can't, we're going to stop there at En Traverse. I can make that hundred miles all right, but not much more."

"Bill will have it there," Alan assured. "He may not be there himself, he's probably on duty; but we agreed exactly where to cache it. It'll be waiting for us."

They climbed in, taxied twice around the lake to warm the spluttering motor, took off and headed north toward Goose Point at Lake En Traverse.

The day was bright, clear. With the heavy rains stopped and the insect scourges abating, Alan knew the bandits were on the move again or shortly would be. They probably had lain low until now. When they did stir, he wanted to be there on the Big Alooska to look out for Joyce.

Ever since he came to believe that Dave MacMillan knew nothing of the crime, he had been puzzling about that pack of stolen furs. Something dark and sinister lay behind that pack. There was some connection between the trader and those criminals. But what?

Alan reasoned: "Those furs didn't get in that shed by accident. Those men might have had a grudge against Dave MacMillan and planted them there. They might have figured he'd show them to us and get in hot water. That guess is at least possible. If it's true, then their grudge might lead them to strike at Joyce. They likely feel bold enough, after the miserable failure of our first patrol."

If they intended anything against Joyce, they doubtlessly would attempt it just before they started eastward on their trek through the Great Barrens and Strong-Woods. Alan had dreamed of that, dreamed of her being captured and taken along, as the bandits had captured Margaret Fournier. In those fantasies, so sharp and clear they woke him up, he had connected her capture with that towering red-haired outlaw whom he and Bill had glimpsed when they lay behind the muskrat house.

With Haskell refusing to extend her any protection whatsoever, Alan felt that he and he alone stood between her and a terrible danger. If anything happened to the plane, or to him and Buzzard . . .

Looking ahead through the propeller disk, he glimpsed the great blue lake of his rendezvous with Bill. A few minutes later on the northern shore he sighted Goose Point reaching out into the sunlit waters of En Traverse.

Leaning forward, he pointed out the promontory to Buzzard and shouted into his partner's ear:

"That's the place. Glide down and light, close in as you can. I don't see Bill there, but he probably couldn't get away from duty to wait for us. Our supplies are cached in that red-willow thicket back next to the woods. We'll go ashore and get them."

Buzzard cut off ignition. The engine roar stopped. As the plane glided down at a mile-long tangent and swept over Goose Point, Alan leaned out into the slipstream and looked under keel, searching the flag-and-willow headland for a possible sight of Bill Hardsock.

Hardly expecting to meet Bill, he was not surprised when his old partner failed to show up. But as the machine glided silently over the point, his eyes were caught by an object there on the muddy landwash. At a second glance he saw it was a large gasoline drum lying in full view at the very tip of the headland. He could even see the tracks of the man who had rolled it out there.

The sight of the drum startled him. He queried silently: "Why the devil did Bill put that thing out there so glaring? He didn't need to draw my attention; we arranged about the cache. Any Smoky going around the shore-line in a canoe could have seen that drum. He could have tracked back into the willows and found our cache, and reported it at Fort Endurance. Damned clumsy out of Bill to do that!"

Beyond the point the plane touched the surface, plowed on through a shower of spray and came to a stop three hundred yards off the landwash.

In the scarlet-and-gold Police launch, hidden behind a low-sweeping balsam at water edge, Inspector Haskell and Corporal Whipple watched the machine whirr low over the point. As it came down and down, Haskell clutched his rifle a little tighter and watched intently.

His heart leaped as the machine touched the wavelets, skimmed on a little distance, and came to a stop.

"They're going ashore," he breathed exultantly to Whipple, as though unable to believe his incredible luck. "We'll skim out and ram the plane. Get ready!"

Uneasy, Alan stood up in the cockpit and searched the headland with his glasses. Over and over he kept telling himself that it wasn't like Bill, his cautious old patrol partner, to roll that drum of gas out there.

While he was searching the point, he felt Buzzard excitedly grasp his arm.

"Alan! Look! . . . Lord's sake!—look over there!"

Alan whirled and looked where he pointed, at the southern shore of the lake eight miles away.

On a long timbered headland there a sudden sheet of flame had leaped up nearly sixty feet into the air and stood out above the tree tops, with a fiery puff and cloudlet of smoke visible for miles and miles across the open water. A few seconds later the flame died down a little, as though it had been of explosive origin, but a clump of paper birches up which the flame had raced still continued to burn like a gigantic torch.

For moments, bewildered by that huge glaring phenomenon, the two men could only stare at it.

"Fork-tailed lightning!" Buzzard finally gasped. "You tell me what that was, and I'll tell you."

"I can't figure it, either. But it was some man-made thing, that's sure."

Focusing on that distant headland, Alan saw nothing except the fire-wrapped birches. As he brought the glasses down, mystified, frowning, his uneasiness swept through him again, sharp and insistent. That suspicious drum of gasoline—Bill surely wouldn't have

rolled it out there. That huge burst of fire across the lake—it had some meaning.

"Buzzard, something's wrong here! All wrong!"

"You're just imagining things, Alan. Jumpy nerves. Let's go ashore and find the cache."

Alan hung back. His nameless suspicion was whispering to him: "If Bill didn't plant that drum of gas, *who did? And why?*"

Studying those silent thickets back from the water edge, he warned: "I don't like the idea of going ashore here. If something's wrong, you don't know what we might be walking into."

"Well, what're you going to do? We've got seven gallons of gas in the wing tank and five in the emergency, and we can't get far on that!"

"Maybe so, but I'm not walking into any trap. We've got enough to scout around a bit on and see what's what here. Somebody's over there where we saw that big gob of fire. I'm suggesting we get into the air again and hop across and have a look-see. We won't light down, but we'll find out something. That's our best bet. This lay-out here is all off-color and I know it."

For a minute they argued it back and forth. But Alan stood firm, and Buzzard finally gave in.

"All right. We'll hop across. But a couple more hops around over this landscape, and we'll be rocking on the wavelets."

Reluctantly he started the motor, taxied a little distance, began knocking the tops off the gentle waves, gave the plane the gun, and rose in a gentle climb out toward the middle of the lake.

From the height of a hundred feet Alan looked ahead through his glasses, scrutinizing that timbered point where the birches were still ablaze.

He started as the glasses picked up a tiny man-figure far-away on that headland. Watching, he saw it rush out upon the extreme rocky tip. With the plane whirling nearer, he caught the figure in sharper focus —and recognized Bill Hardsock!

CHAPTER XVIII: BILL THE CONQUEROR

WAVING his arms, hat and part of a pine tree, Bill was frantically trying to draw their attention.

Alan leaned forward, cupped his hands and shouted to Buzzard:

"That's Bill! There on the headland. Light and taxi in. He's waving us down, so it must be safe. We'll soon see what the trouble is."

They angled down on the water and skimmed close in ashore. In a canoe Bill came paddling out to meet them.

Alan was astounded when he got a good look at his former partner. In all their years together, even during that canoe trip down the Alooska when they were taking Larry home, he had never seen Bill so woebegone as he was now. He staggered from weariness as he stood up in the wobbly canoe and grasped the cockpit edge. His eyes were bloodshot, his uniform plastered with mud, his unshaven face haggard and drawn. He was a man who tottered on the verge of a breakdown from exhaustion.

"I knowed you'd make it, Alan!" he panted, looking with marveling eyes at Buzzard and the plane. "I knowed you'd show up sometime. The gas and oil—that is, most of it—it's right ashore here, ready for you. There's more cached up the Alooska, too. I was scared. . . . When you lit down over there . . . Lord! I was afraid you were a goner!"

Hastily introducing a new partner to an old one,

Alan demanded: "What d'you mean, Bill? What under heaven are you doing over here? What happened? Man, you're all shot!"

"Am half-dead," Bill admitted. His voice was thick, he could hardly stand up. With the long strain over, a fearful reaction had set in. He looked ready to fall down dead asleep.

"But what happened?" Alan repeated.

"Alan, that Johnny Jump-up caught onto our trick."

"What! Caught on? How?"

"I can't figure out how, but he did. He was out to bag this air machine and nail you two. And he came skittish close to doing it. Lemme tell it:

"I had those drums cached over there on Goose Point like we arranged, and I was waiting there, never suspecting a thing. One evening . . . Must've been four or five days ago; I've damn near lost track of time. . . . Anyway, I was sitting there in the willows slapping mosquitoes and listening to a couple whisky-jacks raise Cain with something back at the timber edge.

"I hadn't nothing much to do, so I sort of moseyed back that way to see what all the fuss was about. I ankled up easy-like, thinking it might be a bear and her cub, and I didn't want to get mauled around. When I got up pretty close I all at once smelled tobacco smoke, cigarette smoke. Just a faint whiff, but no mistake about it.

" 'What the hell?' says I. 'Who's smoking Turkey tobacco around here? And who's all this silent, and close to me, and what's he up to?' It made me leery right away. I followed my nose up-wind and snuck up real careful. There in the first drogue of balsam was a Smoky, that Ogi-Tomax, sitting against a tree, lighting one cigarette on the butt of the last. They were

that kind of cigarette that Haskell gets clear from Paris, Alan.

"When he finally got wise to somebody being near, he grabbed for his rifle. But I jumped for him too quick and hit him a couple times, and while he was coming out of it I lopped that gun of his around a tree. Then I collared him and asked him what the condamnsternation his intentions might be. At first he closed up like an oyster and wouldn't do nothing but grunt and look sour. I was suspicious of him laying low there watching me, so I up and lammed hell out of him then and there till he did pry open his jaws. Once he got started talking he spilled the whole cat out of the bag.

"Haskell had hired him to shadow me and spy out what I was doing. He must have got hep somehow to me taking that gas. How he figured out it was for you, how he ever knowed you were coming down north in an air machine—that's over my head and hands. But he did know. And he and that fish-worm Whipple were coming there to Goose Point in the launch to get me, gas, oil, then lay low and nail you two when you lit down. Two bits to a shirt button they're over there right now!"

As he thought how close he and Buzzard had come to going ashore and being captured, Alan shuddered.

Bill went on: "When the Smoky told me that . . . Say, did I make some tall tracks? I never got such a wiggle on in my life. I told that Smoky, I says, 'You're going to pitch in and help me. One little crooked move out of you, toad-eater, and I'll strip all your clothes off and let you to the *brûlé* flies in your bare hide. They'll make a raw callop out of you before sundown.' I guess he believed it; he tied into the work like he was trying to make a good impression. With him helping, I made

two trips across the lake and snaked the drums all away—all expect one drum which I heard the launch coming and didn't have time to take——"

"It's still over there," Alan interrupted. "They rolled it out in plain sight on the mud. They thought it would draw us down like a decoy, but instead of that it made me suspicious. They overplayed. But what got you all shot this way, Bill?"

"I've been awake four or five days and nights, that's what! Not one wink! Didn't dare sleep. It made me sweat blood to think of you lighting down over there and getting nailed. I had to draw your attention somehow, when you were over the lake; and it had to be one whopper of a signal, that far away. I got a couple big piles of birch paper ready and had a drum of gas handy to soak it with; and I kept a dry-wood fire going so's I could stand back and throw a blazing chunk at the paper. But it made the signal, all right. It nearly singed me and I stood thirty feet back."

"I'll vow it made a signal," Buzzard commented. "It looked like the evacuation of Lens."

"I had to stay awake every minute," Bill continued, "for fear you'd come and fly right into the trap. And then I had to guard the Smoky. He's tied up back there; didn't dare turn him loose, or he'd told Haskell where I was. If I'd ever got started dozing, I'd have beaten this Rip Winkle fellow for long-distance sleeping. There was times when I got so near overpowered I had to wade out and set on a rock with the water up under my chin, where I didn't dare go to sleep or I'd been drownded."

Merely by looking at Bill, Alan knew that his former partner had left half his story untold. It was only afterwards that he heard all the details of Bill's heroic siege.

"How about Joyce?" he asked. "You've been to see her, Bill?"

"I ducked aside twice. Last time was a week ago. She's taken in a big raft of peltry. She's closing up the place to go out to Edmonton and be with her dad."

"A week ago," Alan thought. "Anything could have happened in a week." He asked, "Any news at Endurance?"

Just everyday things, Bill reported. Except for Larry. Larry would cry, Bill said, whenever he looked at his shattered leg. Larry, who kept himself as young as men half his age, who prided himself on his wolf-lean body—he was wasted away to a mere shadow of his former self.

Glancing out across En Traverse, Alan suggested: "We'd better be leaving here. Haskell and his stool pigeon over there probably saw us light. They may take a notion to whip across the lake after us. Where's the oil and gas, Bill?"

"Right yon by that rock jumble. The Smoky is just this side. I'll go along——"

"You stay here; you're about once in. Buzzard, you turn the plane and make ready for a quick getaway in case that launch shows up. I'll get the drums."

Skirling ashore, he saw the Indian, Ogi-Tomax, tied against a tree near a little smudge. Freeing him hastily, he hurried to the tangle of junipers and granite boulders where he found the precious gas and oil which Bill had sworn to bring to the rendezvous.

As he raked off the bulrushes and lopped junipers and looked down at this evidence of how Bill Hardsock had kept faith, a lump rose in Alan's throat. All to help a former comrade, Bill had sacrificed his treasured leave of absence, had been caught in theft of Police stores, had gone a. w. o. l. several days, and was

in for heavy punishment when he returned to duty. With personal vengeance added, Haskell would give him the limit.

Taking a load out to the plane, Alan hoisted it up to Buzzard, who began siphoning into the wing tank.

With an anxious inquiry in his bloodshot eyes, Bill asked:

"Say, Alan, why can't I go along on this trick? I'd give a leg to. I'm a. w. o. l. now. Haskell can't do much worse to me than he intends to do as it is."

"But if you go with me, if you're a. w. o. l. much longer, you'll be charged with desertion."

"I don't give a toot. I want to go. We stood leg to leg against those bandits once, Alan. . . ."

After all that Bill had done for them, Alan hadn't the heart to refuse him. He asked Featherof:

"How about it—can we carry a third person?"

"Well, we maybe could. But I wouldn't like . . . It'd cut down our gas load, and this is only a two-place plane."

"Then I'll not go," Bill agreed sturdily. "Don't want to be a drag. I'll sleep off my dry-jag here and then mosey in to Endurance."

Alan went after two more drums. As he reached the plane with them, his ears caught a faint low drone barely audible far out upon En Traverse. Standing up on the cockpit edge, he turned his glasses north.

Six miles out, the powerful scarlet-and-gold launch was heading straight toward them.

"Knock off on that!" he jabbed at Buzzard. "We've got to get gone. They'll ram us, or shoot at us from protection of the launch. You've got enough in the tank to take us to the Alooska. We'll stow these drums aboard, and what we can't take we'll leave here on this headland. Can get it later."

Under Buzzard's directions they worked frantically. When they were ready, when Bill clambered down into the canoe and held out his hand in good-bye, Alan was struck to the heart by the pleading unspoken prayer which Bill stoutly refused to word.

"Buzzard!" He jerked around to his flight partner. "Bill's got to go along! Damned if I can leave him out in the cold! I simply can't do it."

"Then try to wedge him in with you. We'll carry him, if we have to tie him on!"

Alan pulled him up. Bill managed to squeeze into the tiny one-place compartment, and by that act deserted the Mounted Police.

With the big boat only a mile out, Buzzard taxied the plane and headed it parallel to the shore line. Through the glasses Alan watched the launch. Whipple was driving it. Even on clear deep water he lacked the nerve to open the boat all out, as Frank Pedneault would do on a treacherous river. But the launch, skimming in upon them like a swooping hawk, was speedily bearing down within rifle range.

It seemed to Alan that the White Speedair, heavily laden with gas and oil and a third man, would never rise from the water. It taxied nearly a half-mile before it began smacking the wavelets. The Police boat swerved right and diagonaled in to cut across its course. White puffs of smoke were bursting from a rifle in the prow, from a rifle in the hands of George Haskell.

But when the plane finally did take hold of the air, it left the boat behind in a twinkling. Roaring out of range, it swung away into the northeast, toward its goal on the Big Alooska.

CHAPTER XIX : THE INCIDENT OF THE SASH-BELT

THROUGH the glasses Alan made out that tiny clearing on the north bank where Joyce's home nestled within whisper of the spruces. Two miles down river Buzzard throttled the motor, eased the stick forward and glided expertly down and down into that difficult narrow lane of evergreens. With the trees blurring past on either hand, he skimmed low over the water, touched easily and gracefully, and came to a stop a hundred yards up-stream from the canoe landing.

When Alan rose up, stiff and cramped, with the plane drifting slowly down current, he looked ashore; and his imagined picture of his return suddenly became reality to the letter. For Joyce appeared in the doorway and stood there a moment, transfixed with astonishment, as he had known she would be; and when he waved to her, when she recognized him and Bill, she came running down the path, bareheaded in the noon sun.

He started to get out the canvas canoe to tow the plane in to the landing; but Joyce, understanding, untied her father's sturdier craft, laid in an extra paddle, and came skirling out toward them.

As Alan clambered down upon a float and waited, he remembered his decision, last night beside his lonely camp fire, to tell Joyce what had happened within him since he saw her last, and to tell her of that inexorable circumstance which had led to his engagement to Elizabeth. Easy that decision then, but he wavered now.

Did he dare tell her that? If it was useless, if she had put him out of her life, did he dare resurrect all the poignant memories and intimacies between them? To-day he would find out how she regarded him; today she would surely give him some clear token.

Reaching out, he caught the prow of her canoe. Joyce rose and stepped up. . . . In another instant he was clasping her hand.

"Joyce! Joyce! I was afraid for you—here alone, girl. I can't tell you how glad—when I saw you . . . And glad to be back here."

As their eyes met, as Alan felt her small hand warm in his, he was torn between the joy of being with her again and a vague whispering fear. In that first moment of their meeting, when impressions stood out so sharp and clear, it seemed that all passion had gone out of Joyce's manner toward him. In former times when he came to visit her she had greeted him shyly, with a restraint that was a girl's self-defense against her own love. She greeted him warmly now, she was friendly, even cordial, but in the same way as she would have met Bill Hardsock or Pedneault or Larry.

Introducing her to Buzzard, he stepped down into the canoe, lapped the painter rope around a strut; and together he and she guided the plane athwart current to the landing. After mooring it securely and getting part of their personal duffle, the four of them, with old Pence appointing himself guard over the machine, went up the path to the trading store.

Alan could fairly feel the dozen eager questions Joyce wanted to ask him: Who was this new-found friend whom he called Buzzard? Where had they got this plane? How did they intend to use it against those bandits? But practical little soul as always, she asked no questions then. The three men, tired and

hungry and desperately in need of rest, were her first consideration. Going back to the kitchen, she heated them water to wash and shave, and set about getting a hot substantial meal.

Bill Hardsock, walking in a daze after his terrific ordeal, could not wait for food. Even on the plane trip, hurtling through air with the motor roar in his ears, he had several times dozed off. He hardly knew where he was or what he was doing. At Joyce's suggestion Alan took him into her small room, helped him strip off his muddied uniform and saw him fall asleep like a stone sinking out of sight in water.

As he hung Bill's clothes on a chair, Alan happened to notice that his own picture, which for two years had stood on Joyce's dresser, was not there now. It halted him like a blow. The pictures of her parents and her Ottawa chief were still there. His alone had been removed. Why had she taken it down? Was it some accident, entirely innocent? Or . . .

Back in the kitchen, while Buzzard was outside washing away the grime and oil of five days' flight, he remembered the *ceinture flechée* and found it and brought it to Joyce.

"I thought of you, out in Edmonton," he said awkwardly, breaking the string. "I believed you might like this, Joyce. It isn't much, but I was short of . . . I was pretty near broke."

As Joyce unfolded the sash-belt and saw its exquisite beauty, an admiration leaped into her eyes. "Oh, it's beautiful! It's the loveliest I've ever seen anywhere."

But then, as she looked from the gift to the giver, something seemed to check Joyce. With an effort she forced herself to say quietly, "It was kind of you, Alan, to think of me."

Alan turned away in bitter disappointment. "It was

kind of you . . ." How cold and distant those words sounded. She was talking to him across an abysm.

When Buzzard and he came back in, they sat down to a meal of caribou steak, mushrooms Joyce had gathered, baked bracken roots as palatable as potatoes, and waterfowl eggs from the great southern marshes —*le poulailler du bon Dieu.* Joyce had already eaten, but she sat at the head of the table to keep them company.

As she passed them food and the three of them talked, Alan could not help noticing Buzzard's quick ardent admiration of Joyce. Buzzard kept glancing at her, studying her intently, evidently astonished to find a pretty, well-educated girl like her living almost alone here in this far-northern wilderness. There was no quest in his glance, but an instinctive respect, a tribute to her prettiness and her spirited personality.

"You go hunting caribou and wolves!" his eyes seemed to be saying. "You, by yourself, in a country like this! And running a trading post all alone!"

A little later, when Joyce had insisted on their getting a few hours of rest and had left them in her father's room, he remarked:

"There's one lucky devil in this world, Baker."

"What do you mean?" Alan asked, spreading a blanket and pillow on a bench so that Buzzard could have the bed.

"The man that Miss MacMillan's going to marry."

Alan winced. He had never thought of Joyce marrying another man. The remark aroused a passionate unreasoning hurt in him.

Sitting at the edge of the bed, Buzzard smoked a cigarette and glanced nervously at his partner who had lain down and was trying to get a little rest to fit himself for the flight and battle just ahead. Something was

wrong between Alan and this winsome, spirited Joyce MacMillan. There was, or had been, some passionate relationship between them. It had evidently gone on the rocks: Baker was engaged to some girl at Fort Endurance; and Miss MacMillan . . . Well, there was that incident which he himself had seen half an hour ago when he happened to glance through the window.

"It's a pity," he thought, "for them to bust up. A damned shame, that's what. She's a regular girl. Looks, personality and spunk. . . . Lord, I'd hate to ever quarrel with her!"

He wondered whether to tell Alan about that incident he'd seen. Alan was evidently floundering around in the dark about Miss MacMillan. He was a bit awkward and blundering in such matters. Buzzard thought:

"First chance I get, believe I'll tell him what she did. He ought to know. She either loves him or hates him, to do a thing like that!"

When Alan woke up, late in the evening, Buzzard was still asleep and Bill Hardsock was dead to the world. Hoping to find Joyce, he went out into the trading hall.

Joyce was not there. For a few moments Alan stood looking about. As Bill had told him, she was closing out the post. The shelves were bare of trade goods; a few packs of personal belongings had been corded up; the whole place was taking on a cold ghastly loneliness, prophetic of the time when Joyce would leave this home of hers, and the North, and would never be here again.

He hated to think of Joyce's girlhood home being sold to some utter stranger. Thinking of Larry, soon to be invalided out of service and condemned to a life

of intolerable idleness, he wondered whether he might not get this post for his crippled patrol partner. It was well located, and Larry's host of friends among the Indians would be sure to bring him their furs.

Still hunting Joyce, he went down to the landing where old Pence, whittling at his story-stick, was guarding the plane against any log floating down and damaging it.

"You riz up early, Alan b'y."

"Yes. Got a couple things to do. They must've been on my mind. Where's Joyce?"

"She went down th' river bank, down thar t' that fust brook comin' out'n th' timber, to snag some trout. We're shy on meat."

Alan stepped into Dave MacMillan's canoe, laid in an extra paddle, and started down-stream. Gliding around the first bend, he saw Joyce two hundred yards ahead, standing on a jutting rock beside a brook mouth. She was between him and the late evening sun, and the golden glow of it shone through her rebellious hair. With the canoe drifting toward the rock, he gazed at her, caught in some wakeful phantasy. In her graceful body, so unrestrained and alive, there was a hint of Indian freedom. She seemed so very young, so girlish and dainty—she who hunted wolves and went unafraid into trackless places. A fever rose in Alan's veins, possessive and tender, and yet fearful. . . . Had she put him out of her heart as she had removed his picture from her sight?

When he came alongside and lifted the canoe prow out upon the shelving rock, Joyce greeted him with a quiet friendly smile. They sat down together on the wolf-foot moss. As though wondering at his errand, she glanced at the canoe and two paddles.

After his days in the plane, with the swish of hurt-

ling struts and the thunder of a motor dinning his ears, it was incredibly quiet on the spruce-buried stream. Incredibly good to be making a wilderness canoe trip, at sunset on the river. Behind them the heavy woods, mossy and cool and dim with perpetual twilight, stretched back to the flanking hills. Across at the south bank a big Keewatin otter was playing among some half-submerged boulders. At the brook-mouth trout were leaping at their evening feeding, and big-finned Arctic graylings were saulting out in silvery arcs. In the whispering surface wind, mayflies of brilliant color were dancing their mating dance; and that little winged wolf of the air, the hungry insatiable dragonfly, went coursing over the water, snapping gnats out of the air with its trapdoor jaws.

Very observant, Alan covertly stared at Joyce. She was looking past him at the far shore and woods. Her lips were slightly parted, her jacket was loosened at the throat, her dark eyes were half-veiled by their dreamy lashes. As he studied her features, it seemed to Alan that something profound had happened to Joyce since he saw her last. She had changed; she was hardly the same girl. There was some new strange spiritual quality about her, as of a person who has gone down into a ravaging sickness and has had the strength to conquer and rise out of it, but at a terrible cost.

To break the silence between them he began telling her of these last weeks—his trip out to Edmonton, his providential luck in meeting Buzzard, the prison charges that stood against them, their flight back north, their escape from Haskell's trap, his gladness when he saw her running down the path.

As she listened, thoroughly alive to the danger and hardships he had gone through, Joyce felt a profound gratitude, for she knew Alan had done this largely

for her sake. When he mentioned the prison charges facing him, she experienced a moment of panic; and imagined herself testifying in his behalf, fighting for him as he had fought for her.

The Victoria position, Elizabeth's triumph in that matter, caused her no twinge, no hurt at all. She had steeled herself against that. Here on this very rock Bill once had talked with her, and here she had spent a night when time stood still. Since then she had often thought that the world held nothing of happiness or hope of happiness to match against the agony of those dark hours.

A little later, after they had discussed plans for closing in upon the bandits and she had told him where to find Mugwa-Etthen's band, Alan rose up and gave her his hand to rise. He said:

"I've got to go down river a few miles, Joyce. Bill cached some supplies near that *saut* where you and I got upset that day and had to swim for it. I want to bring them up here this evening."

He waited a moment for some hint that she might wish to go along with him. None came. He suggested:

"It'd take only a couple hours. If you'd care to, I'd like for you to go."

"I'd better stay. Bill and Mr. Featherof will be awake before long. I'll have supper ready when you get back."

"I can help you with that—if you'll go."

Joyce hesitated. She was aware that Alan deeply wanted her company. After all he'd done for her, it seemed cruelly ungrateful to refuse. And she herself wanted to go. But bitter wisdom whispered a warning. Since that morning when she turned his letters and picture and gifts to ashes, there had been no looking back. There must be none now. She had strength and cour-

age to talk with him calmly and to act toward him as though they had never been more than good friends; but she dared not presume too far on that new-born strength. To be alone with him two hours on a twilight river, with their talk inevitably drifting to former times—it would be unbearable.

With gentle firmness she said: "I'd like to go, Alan. But I'll have to run back to the post. There's so many things to do." She tried to smile. "I don't want to be a neglectful hostess to Bill and Mr. Featherof."

As she started up the river trail, her thoughts brooded on several things Alan had said in the course of his story, especially on his occasional references to Elizabeth. At the time, in his presence, fighting to be calm and casual, she had not dwelt upon them, but now she could look at their significance. Not that he had said anything derogatory about Elizabeth. But his tone, his manner . . . Was he becoming a little disillusioned? Was he seeing Elizabeth Spaulding not as the sister of his dead partner Curt, not as a girl to be cherished and shielded, but as a selfish, calculating person? Was he dimly foreseeing what his married life with her was going to be?

Joyce checked herself sharply from hoping or even thinking that Alan might break off his engagement, or from extending him anything more than grateful friendship. She was glad, profoundly glad, that his words had caused no resurrection of hope, no tremor of emotion. The discovery of her strength suffused her with a kind of pride. But for all that, she felt a great sorrow for Alan. He was bitterly unhappy, and she knew it. What was his situation now? Police work, his life in the North, comradeship with his old friends—everything that he had cherished was stripped away

from him, and he was going into a marriage reluctantly and forcing himself into a life that was alien to his whole nature. He, of all men, deserved better than that. As Officer Commanding at Fort Endurance, he had been so considerate of his subordinates, so kindly to the wayward Indian bands, so helpful and unselfish to everyone in his life.

When Joyce thought of all that and of the bitter unhappiness he'd come down to now, her sympathy, tender and compassionate, went out to him wholeheartedly.

Returning at deep twilight with the drums, Alan found Buzzard cleaning fouled spark plugs on the plane engine.

A bit tired from the up-stream drag with a heavy load, he sat down on the planking to smoke a cigarette. Buzzard finished the job presently and joined him.

Candles were already lit in the trading store. Alan looked up the path, expecting to see Joyce's figure in the lighted doorway. He hoped to have an hour or two alone with her this evening. But all day the conviction had grown upon him that a talk would be worse than useless. It would be a harrowing of old wounds, a cruel wrong to Joyce, after he had gone from her to Elizabeth; a grossly dishonest thing, when Joyce was now under obligations to him.

If only God's truth didn't sound so preposterous; if only he could tell Joyce that he had become engaged to Elizabeth, had expected to marry Elizabeth, and yet all the time, in his deepest longing, had wanted not Elizabeth but her. . . .

"If we're going to get away from here first thing in the morning," Buzzard broke into his thoughts,

"we ought to put in a couple hours' work after supper on these aileron leads. They're pretty bad frayed around the pulleys."

Alan knew that Buzzard was asking him to help with that job. But he did not answer. He wanted this evening with Joyce. Unless he took circumstances into his own hands tonight, he and Joyce would drift across a continent from each other in a few days more. Their talk this afternoon on the boulder must have prepared her in some measure for what he wanted to say. Torn with uncertainty of her affections for him, he was debating about this evening. After the incidents of today—his picture gone, her coldness, her refusal to go with him—he was wavering, undecided.

He tossed his cigarette out on the water. "Maybe we'd better go up and help Joyce what we can."

Buzzard did not stir. For several minutes he had been glancing uneasily at Alan. Finally he screwed up courage to speak.

"It's strictly none of my business, Alan, but—but . . . You're engaged to a girl there at Endurance, but you bought Miss MacMillan that rainbow scarf with your last dollar and you talked a lot about getting back here and helping *her*——"

Alan was loath to speak of Joyce, even with a partner. He tried to say quietly: "We've been good friends for several years. She's one of the sweetest girls I ever knew. You've met her now. You'd naturally want to help her, wouldn't you?"

"Of course. But—but . . . See here, I may be imagining things; you can tell me to shut up if you want to—but it seems to me there's something wrong between you and her."

Alan repeated, rather shortly: "We're good friends. There's nothing more than that."

Buzzard knew different. He had had a vague suspicion of it ever since Alan first mentioned Joyce MacMillan's name at the café in Edmonton. As he remembered the incident of this noon, he wondered at the Spartan courage Joyce had shown and at the passion behind such an act. Surely some bitter unhappiness lay between her and Baker.

He said reluctantly: "If that's true, if you're merely friends and nothing more, what made her burn up that scarf you brought her?"

"What!" Alan whirled on him, gasping. "Burn up that *ceinture flechée?"* He half-rose. "You say that's what she did?"

It startled Buzzard—that look on Alan's face. His words had been an unintended rapier thrust. In a flash he realized he had said something better left unsaid; had blundered into something portentous in his partner's life.

Alan demanded sharply: "You're sure about that? You didn't make a mistake?"

For a moment, groping about to retrieve his blunder, Buzzard hardly knew what to say or do. There had been no mistake; he had seen that incident with his own eyes when he glanced through the window to find where Alan was. He debated whether to draw back from his statement or to plunge ahead and tell the rest of it—Joyce's momentary battle, the shudder that swept her whole body when she put the scarf into the stove, and the quick blinding tears that she dashed away.

He thought: "Better not get any deeper into this. I'd only blunder again. Better back out entirely."

He stammered: "I might have made a mistake. I might—uh—it might have been the wrapping paper. I just merely saw her put—uh—something into—and

I jumped to conclusions. *Must* have been the wrapper. Why would any person want to burn up a gift like that? Let's forget it."

His tones carried no conviction. He realized it himself. Alan disbelieved him; Alan knew Joyce had burned the scarf he gave her.

Cursing himself hotly, Buzzard looked out across the purpling river. He had meant only the best, and he had dealt Alan a savage pitiless blow. Why in hell hadn't he kept quiet about that incident?

After a little time Alan said to him:

"You'd better go up, Buzzard; she may be waiting for us."

"Aren't you going?"

"No—not now; I don't much care. . . . I don't want supper."

Something in his voice warned Buzzard not to urge him. As he turned away, Alan said, in the tones of a man who has made some hard and abiding decision:

"When you've had supper, come back down here; I'll help you with that work; we'll do it now, so we can get away early. I was thinking—for this evening—something else. But that's out—now. . . ."

CHAPTER XX: THE SECRET OF MANY WATERS

AT THREE o'clock the next morning Buzzard lifted the plane out of the Big Alooska. With Alan directing him, he headed due north.

One hundred and thirty miles away, nearly four hundred miles from Fort Endurance, a small tribe of Tinnehs lived along the western fringe of the Thal-Azzah. They were a timid, skulking, inoffensive band, primitive in their ways, browbeaten by the arrogant Loucheux and Caribou Tinnehs, and shouldered into a region where other tribes scorned to live. Dave MacMillan had been their friend and they brought him their furs; and Alan, during his years at Endurance, had sent a protective patrol to them twice a year.

Joyce had found out where they were spending this summer; and Alan had a mission with their old headman, Mugwa-Etthen.

When the timbered country began yielding to lakes and semi-muskeg, he got out his glases and started searching ahead for their camp. The extent of country that he could sweep was extraordinary. On the flight north he had practiced until he could steady the glasses in a trembling plane. With those powerful binoculars he had counted muskrat houses in distant lakes, had picked up canoes on rivers hardly visible to the naked eye, had once caught the white glint of a prospector's tent against a mountain ten full miles away.

At a height of five thousand feet he could sweep a region of more than two hundred thousand acres. The

eyes of an eagle, the wings of a bullet-swift curlew, and that big-barreled Browning machine gun—through luck and driving purpose and a faith in his dubious plan, he had smashed through obstacles till now he held the power and heavy odds over those bandits.

The sure knowledge of this was about all that was left to him. His work in the Mounted, his life here in the North, were both gone; and Buzzard's cataclysmic words last evening had showed him that his secret hope towards Joyce had been a fool's hope, a fool's wishful thinking.

Last night, there in the twilight at the canoe landing, his thoughts had been bitter thoughts. How low he must have fallen in her esteem, that she should burn his gift to her! At first it had seemed a little cruel of Joyce to do that. But then he looked at the incident with relentless honesty, and he could not blame her. Once he and she had planned to marry. People had spoken of it; it had been generally accepted along the River. She had liked him, loved him. What must her feelings have been as she watched his relations with Elizabeth, and saw him engaged to another girl and coming no more to the Big Alooska? She must have felt shame, a burning shame, at being jilted. Month after lonely month of that—it had been an outrage to her girlhood. Nothing she could do to him could be so heartless as what he had done to her.

Through the propeller disk he at last sighted the Indian camp, a cluster of brown leather tents beside a lake where the band was passing the summer near their fish weirs. Strings of sun-blackened fish and waterfowl were stretched between the lodges; a dozen skin canoes lay up-turned on the landwash; an indiscriminate mixture of naked children and shrill yapping "crackies" were playing along the mud flat.

As Buzzard roared over the camp and banked to alight, the winged monster created pandemonium. Some of the Indians broke for the nearest flags, others stood staring up in petrified astonishment, others pulled deer-skins over their heads and stoically awaited the crack of doom.

When Alan and Bill went ashore, the band was reassured by the sight of the two *Shagalasha* who had been their good friends in the past. Old Mugwa-Etthen, a gnarled and wrinkled old savage, stalked up and gravely bade them welcome.

Leaving Bill to explain what the winged monster was, Alan took the old headman aside and squatted down with him for a council *wa-wa*.

After this flood season of heavy rains, Alan knew there were few areas in the watery wilderness of the Thal-Azzah where a party of men could camp. He himself had only a hazy idea where those areas lay; but this old headman, Mugwa-Etthen, Who-Follows-the-Caribou, had lived his life along the border of that great marsh and knew it better than any man alive, and could probably give him a pretty definite idea where to look.

The most he expected from the old Indian was information to save him a couple days of searching.

The news he did get, all unexpectedly, fairly staggered him.

Very wisely, Joyce had kept from letting the nomad bands know anything about the Police defeat. Only the Mackenzie 'breeds and a few of the Loucheux had heard. The *Shagalasha* maintained order in so huge a territory largely through their reputation of never failing, and the news of their stinging defeat would do incalculable harm. Joyce had not even told old Mugwa-Etthen.

After pledging the headman to silence, in guttural Tinneh Alan began sketching the story of the robbery and battle. As he told of the bandits escaping up the Alooska, he noticed that the old chief suddenly became all interested. At the mention of those men hiding somewhere in the Thal-Azzah, the old Indian visibly started.

Alan looked at him keenly. "Something's up," he thought. "I've stumbled onto something." He demanded: "When I *wa-wa* two three breaths ago you start like hit buck. Why?"

The old headman, silent a moment, rumbled throatily: "The moose-bird must have whispered to my friend the *Shagalasha,* 'Go to the Follower-of-the-Etthen-Herds. He sees and knows everything.' And the *Shagalasha* came."

Drawing a crude map of the Thal-Azzah with his bony forefinger, he sprang his astounding news.

Ten suns ago, he said, Tukeok and another young buck had gone westward into the Land of Many Waters to locate rat colonies for autumn trapping. One evening they heard the boom-boom of fire-sticks far-away southwest. Slipping up, timid, cautious, they saw some strange men shooting wavies for food. They saw a tent, a camp on an island. . . .

For several minutes, fighting down a wild elation, Alan forced himself to crouch there, asking questions, fixing that map and that spot unforgettably in his mind.

At the wigwams he rejoined Bill.

"Come on! Let's be getting into the air! An hour and a half from now we'll be saying it with a machine gun. When we flew up here we brought our luck along!"

Thirty miles west of the Indian camp they sped over a caribou *foule,* thousands and thousands of the animals trickling north in loose columns to the cool hills of the Arctic coast to escape the flies. The females and calves had gone a month ago. This was the male *traverse.* Though it was only a third of the western Barrens herd, yet as far north and south as vision reached, the dun animals were walking the ridges and swimming the lakes in inestimable numbers.

On beyond the *foule* the Thal-Azzah began in earnest. Innumberable creeks, rivers and sluggish channels crisscrossed in every direction; countless lakes and ponds dotted its vast extent; quaking bogs, broad gleaming mud-flats, niggerhead quagmire and marshes of tall flags, stretched to the watery horizon.

At every rookery lake that they roared over, the teeming waterfowl were thrown into wild confusion. They looked down upon thick-clustered colonies of muskrat and beaver homes, a trapping paradise for the young bucks of Mugwa-Etthen's band. Out in the middle of the larger lakes they could see white floating specks that were great trumpeter swans, their snake-like necks up-stretched, honking sonorously at this mighty roaring eagle of the skies.

From his height of three thousand feet, reading the country spread below him, Alan could follow the crude finger map without once being in doubt. Under keel now lay the string of seven little mud volcanoes which the old Indian had mentioned. Beyond that the immense mile-broad channel stretching westward into the heart of the Thal-Azzah. Far-away west, barely visible through the glasses, a glint of blue, of blue deep waters. . . . That should be the great blue-water lake which Mugwa-Etthen had described. It should have islands in the center of it. On one of the islands near

the north edge of the cluster the bandits should be camped, if they had not moved on.

As the plane sailed out over the glistening lake, Alan leaned out and searched ahead, with his eyes glued to the binoculars. There in the lake center was that group of islands, nearly two score of them, as old Mugwa-Etthen said. Hardly bigger than gardens they looked, merely high backbones thrust out of water.

Before he was within two miles of the group, he noticed that waterfowl were scarce around the northernmost islands. No wary swans, no drove of geese, no floating acres of gray and white wavies; but only a scattering of smaller duck.

"Swing north!" he shouted at Buzzard. "Those islets there to themselves. . . ."

The machine swerved and thundered closer. One by one Alan started to search the five. On the first one, nothing. On the second, nothing. But on the third . . . He started suddenly as he caught that center one in clear focus. Bill Hardsock, catching a glimpse with naked eye, yelled and prodded him. Buzzard forgot his controls and leaned out into the slip-stream, staring down.

Below them on that center island, conspicuous to their sky patrol, stood a solitary dirty-white tent.

After a few moments Alan had presence of mind again. He leaned forward and shouted instructions:

"Drop down to a thousand feet. Fly over that island again. Slow. Want to study it carefully before we start things."

Buzzard dropped down, swung around. As the plane sailed over a second time, Alan drew the island up to him. He could see the paths broken through the reeds to water edge, the heaps of wet feathers where the

men had plucked waterfowl, and even a patch on the tent side.

But he saw no canoes.

It puzzled him, the absence of the two boats. Had the bandits gone? It couldn't be; they surely would have taken their tent, for it was probably all the shelter they had. Then where were those canoes?

Studying the tent sharply, he saw a movement of the flap-front and distinguished a man's face, upturned, peering at them.

One bandit there at least! But the others? And those boats gone? . . .

A guess shot into his mind: those others had probably gone hunting, hunting for caribou over east at the *foule*. Waterfowl was poor game to use rifles on. Those men would not waste their ammunition by banging away continuously to get enough meat. Perhaps this one man had been left at camp to guard the precious furs against the hordes of water rats.

As though that watcher there below realized what this ominous circling meant and had become panicky, a puff of white, a single puff, burst from the flap-front. Confident the man was alone and the others were gone, Alan decided to take this bandit alive. He needed information about the others, and information about that pack of furs to clear Dave MacMillan.

While Buzzard circled at a safe distance, he tore a page from a memo book and printed a message:

If you shoot again, we'll splatter you and that island into the lake with our machine guns. Stand out in the clear. No weapons on you. Don't try any crooked move after we light.

He wrapped the message around a monkey-wrench and handed it to Buzzard. From war-time practice of

dropping "eggs" on ammunition dumps and second-trench *Flammenwerfer* and camouflaged batteries of Krupp 79's east of Verdun, with no aërial sights except two nails and a string along the fuselage, Buzzard was a good judge of speed, altitude and the right split-instant to release. Whirling over the island, a few hundred yards up, he planted the missile within a dozen paces of the flap-front.

As they looked back they saw the man run out to it, read the message, hesitate a moment, and then raise his left arm, waving something white.

A pistol-shot off the island the plane lighted. Buzzard stayed in the machine. Alan and Bill got out the canvas canoe, slipped automatics into their pockets, took rifles prominently in hand and went ashore.

While Bill searched the bandit for a hidden revolver, Alan looked at him curiously. He was a strange character to find in this country. Slant-eyed, his skin olive, he looked as though he had Oriental blood in his veins. The rag he had waved in token of surrender was a sling. His right arm dangled limp at his side.

Alan demanded, "Are you the fellow we hit in that fight?"

"Chink" Woolley nodded.

Bill went inside the tent, looked around, came back out.

"Furs and dust here all right, Alan. But only one rifle and a couple blankets."

"Are those other men out hunting?" Alan asked. "Or where?"

Woolley batted his eyes slowly, as hough taking thought. "Huntin', yes," he managed.

"Which way?"

"Nort'-east."

"That probably means they went southwest," Alan remarked, and his short laugh was not pleasant. "You lie natural and easy-like, but it won't get by with us. We've nailed too many liars in our time. Now I'm going to get some information out of you, one way or other. Information is all you're good for on earth, friend, so you'd better not be backward.

"I want to know who this party of yours is, where they came from, how they got into this country, how they know their way about in it. I want to know how that pack of otter pelts got into Trader MacMillan's storage shed. I want to know the man who killed Jimmy Montgomery there on the *Midnight Sun*. Now get busy. You're maybe out of practice telling the truth, but try hard; try *damned hard*."

He clicked the safety on his automatic and brought his elbow up against his side.

Chink Woolley trembled, his knees shook, he wilted. That gaping automatic muzzle, the arrow-swift way Alan had nailed his first lie, his captor's lean hard face, leaner and harder even than Slob-Ice Jensen's, took all the starch out of him.

He guessed that this man must be the Baker fellow, *le sergent terrible,* whom Méti André always mentioned in lowered voice. Those hypnotic gray eyes seemed to be boring through him. That heavy automatic was tilted to make his next lie the last.

He was remembering, too, the secret intention of his confederates to murder him because his arm was shattered and he was usless at canoe work. Baker at least would not kill him. And if he turned King's evidence, he might escape the noose.

It was a strange story that Alan and Bill listened to, there on the island in the heart of Many Waters. . . .

Eighteen months ago, on a whaler in Beaufort Sea, the five whites, excluding the half-breed André whom they picked up later, had "run a buck" under Jensen's instigation, but were overpowered by the captain and rest of the crew. Flung ashore with the skipper's sulphurous good wishes at bleak Demarcation Point on the Arctic coast, they made their way across the Romanzoff's to the new placer fields in the Kayukuk headwaters. They came too late to get worthwhile claims; and they discovered, too, that "hawking" in the perpetually-frozen sub-soil was even harder work than whaling.

It was Jensen, brooding over their predicament, who conceived the idea that it was easier to find gold which already had been found than to thaw a hole thirty feet down to black sand and bedrock and then maybe get nothing. It was Jensen who allayed their fears and dangled the golden lure in front of their eyes till their mouths watered and they were ready for anything he planned.

The Vigilance Committee there and a detective sergeant from the U. S. Army were a stumbling block to claim jumping or robbery or bush murder. Jensen was entirely too shrewd to try anything in their immediate neighborhood, and so his scheme hung fire, till he happened across Méti André.

André the half-breed was a find. He fitted into the party like a key into a lock. They were crassly ignorant of the country; they were tyros when it came to traveling, hiding, living in the bush. None of them had ever paddled a canoe or followed a dim trail across a mountain range. But André the 'breed was bush-wise as a weasel and water-wise as a muskeg mink, and he knew the whole North country from Roes Welcome to Point Barrow as he knew the palm of his hand.

Born near the Ramparts of the Mackenzie River, he had spent more than thirty years in Mackenzie and Keewatin, working *en derouine* for the big fur companies. A dozen years ago he had found it advisable to go away suddenly, after stabbing a Yellowknife whose young squaw he much wanted for his wilderness wife. He had got out of Canada to the American Yukon; and knowing the Police had long memories as well as long arms, he had stayed out. Disguised by whiskers and scars from drunken brawls, he had roamed foot-loose through the Alaska Border country till Jensen and the others met up with him.

It was André who knew of the unprotected steamers, on the Mackenzie far eastward, bringing down rich cargoes of gold and of precious northern furs worth more than their weight in gold. It was André who had brought the party into this strange country, by back rivers and untraversed trails, avoiding all sight of men, so that they seemed to have dropped from the sky. It was André who suggested the place of attack and the Thal-Azẓah as a place to hide in after the swoop and robbery. And it was 'breed André's sharp-speaking Savage that drilled Jimmy Montgomery through the heart. . . .

Alan Baker breathed a little harshly. He ordered, "Describe that 'breed." And he added, "So there will be no mistake when I meet him."

Woolley described his *méti* confederate. Alan nodded curtly. After a few moments' silence, he spoke again: "Now about Trader MacMillan. You seemed to have stuck to the truth so far. Keep it up! How did that pack of furs get in his shed?"

"Jensen put it dere."

"Why?"

Woolley did not know all the details, but from hints

Jensen had dropped he was able to piece the story together pretty well.

Several years ago at Hershell Island, that gathering place for whalers, Indians, traders, Eskimos and Arctic explorers, Jensen had run afoul of Dave MacMillan. He had come ashore from a whaler, hungry for drink and hungry for woman's company after eight months of following the herds. He had found the drink, and in a whisky haze had started to make rough love to fifteen-year-old Joyce MacMillan. He had seized her, had actually tried to carry her off to an Eskimo's hut in those rocky swells just back of the Police post.

Dave MacMillan fell upon him. The Mounted corporal stepped back and made his constables stand off. . . . For years now Jensen had been nursing his hairy chin reminiscently where MacMillan's hard fist had caught him; and his ears still rang with the derisive jeers of those who saw him dog-whipped down across the swells and over the shingle to the whaler.

He had never forgotten the MacMillan girl nor the incident of that snowy October day. The incident had smoldered in his vengeful soul; and when his party passed the trading post, it had flared out. It was a neat stroke, putting that comparatively worthless bale of furs in the shed of the man who had dog-whipped him. He had counted on the trader discovering them, wondering about them, innocently calling the attention of the Police to them, and getting into hot water when he failed to explain how they got there. . . .

The revelation of Dave MacMillan's complete innocence was no surprise to Alan but merely a proof that his and Joyce's instinctive belief had been correct. He was glad for Dave's sake, glad for Joyce's. And now he could know that in buying out of service he

had saved the reputation and possibly the very life of Joyce's father. Under Haskell's tyranny he could never have vindicated Dave. In his own way he had planned, and had fought through to this partial triumph. At least he had carried out now the promise he had made Joyce that gray morning on the Big Alooska.

Writing down the essential points of the confession, he forced Woolley to make his mark on the paper, with himself and Bill as witnesses. He made a second copy for Bill, in case something happened to Bill or him. Then he demanded of Woolley:

"You say those other men went hunting. When did they leave here?"

"Yesterday mornin', about daylight."

"When are you expecting them back?"

Woolley did not know. He seemed strangely hesitant. Fidgeting uneasily, he would glance up at Alan and then away, as though he had something to tell but was afraid to tell it.

Alan saw his agitation. He demanded: "What're you stumbling over? Cooking up some lie?"

The man wetted his dry twitching lips. "You'll not kill me if I tell you de trut'—where dey went? You maybe can git back dere on de Alooska in time to save de girl."

"On the Alooska—in time to save the girl"—Alan jerked as though a bullet had sung past his throat. His face went suddenly pale. "You mean Joyce MacMillan? What about *her?*"

"You'll not kill me? I had not'in' to do wit' it, no hand in dat!"

Alan seized his shoulder and shook him. "Tell it, or by God I'll choke it out of you! Open up. What about her? What do you mean—'in time to save her?' I'll not kill you if you tell."

Woolley stammered: "Dey went down de Alooska to git her. It's Jensen's idee. He's aimin' to take her along on de escape and keep her for himself. He's all burnin' about dat girl. . . ."

His shaky voice trailed off. He shrank back in quivering dread from the expression that had come into Baker's eyes. That deadly calmness with which Baker took the news seemed worse to Chink Woolley than the blind unreasoning fury of Bill Hardsock, who wanted to shoot him then and there.

For a little while, a few moments only, Alan stared unseeingly out across the waters of the great blue lake. To wait here, until the bandits came back? Not that; they'd be three days and nights on the return trip. . . . Joyce would be helpless all that time, in the power of the man who was "all burnin' about dat girl." They had left only thirty-odd hours ago. He stood a chance of beating them to the trading post. . . .

Whirling on Bill he ordered:

"You stay here. You attend to this end of it. Buzzard and I will attend to the other. We'll go after them in the plane. There's a chance we can get to the trading post before they do. You'll have a rifle extra. They're intending to come back here after the loot. If anything happens to Buzzard and me, you'll be left, you'll have a chance at them. It'll be all up to you."

He turned on his heel and ran down to the canoe and skirled out to the waiting plane.

"Get back to the Alooska, Buzzard! To Joyce's home!" He pleaded huskily, "For God's sake make it straight and fast!"

No one appeared at the doorway of the trading store. No one, with hair shimmering in the sun, came running down the path to greet them.

Their shouts at the landing brought no answer from a girl's lips or from old Pence. As they ran up the path, automatics in hand, the building and tiny clearing were lifeless, silent—as silent as the hushed woods around.

In some measure prepared, Alan called Joyce's name as he strode into the trading hall. He called but once; he looked but once into her room.

Buzzard came running to him with a piece of paper in his hands. His face was lit with elation.

"Alan! Alan! Luckiest thing in our whole damned lives! Look here. Read this! Joyce and old Pence had left! Weren't here when that pack came! Went after caribou! Almost too good to be true!"

Alan grasped the note and read. It was in Joyce's fine swift handwriting. No doubt about that. It stated that she and old Pence had gone to Black Timber Lake thirty miles north to get caribou and would be back in two days, in case a patrol happened past.

Alan studied the note for half a minute. His face did not relax. The leaping joy faded out of Buzzard's eyes.

"Yes, too good to be true," Alan commented slowly. "Don't you see?—this note is addressed to Constable Larry Younge. Why did Joyce do that? She knows Larry is not patrolling, knows he is at Endurance all shot up; and *she knows we know it.* Don't you see what she tried to do? It was her only way of telling us that something was wrong. She had to write this note as they dictated it, but she tricked them."

"It's so, it's so," Buzzard agreed. "She tricked them under their very eyes, and counted on us to understand."

From room to room—Joyce's room, her father's,

the kitchen, the trading hall, the ground outside—Alan went carefully, noting signs, reading the story of what had happened.

Nothing about the post was disturbed. There were no signs of a struggle or fight. Joyce's light rifle still hung on a peg in her room. Its barrel inside was clean and shiny; the weapon had not been fired. Joyce must have been surprised and overpowered without a chance to fight back.

At the clearing edge Alan found a trampled spot in a thicket where five men had lain and watched. Kneeling down, examining the broken twigs, the wilted leaves, the crushed nettles, he read that all this had happened three hours ago and that the criminals were thirty or forty miles up the spruce-buried Alooska, with Joyce their prisoner.

About the whole post there was only one telltale sign of something dark and sinister. In their hurry to get away, the bandits had overlooked that sign. Beside a stump in the sunlit clearing, Alan picked up old Pence's story-stick. Once or twice he had wondered what they had done with that old white-haired waif. They would not burden themselves with him, nor would they turn him free, to report and bring the Police hot on their trail. How had they dealt with old Pence? Several times Alan had glanced thoughtfully at the canoe landing where the whispering waters glided past, deep and shadowy. . . .

Now, as he picked up the stick, he saw a brownish-red stain on one end of it, a crimson splash already turning dark; and a few hoary-white hairs clinging to the wood. And this story-stick which old Pence had been whittling at, carving clumsy bas-relief scenes from his own life—scenes of mining camps, of the fur-path

and lonely gold trails, of dog teams and packhorses, of broad-shouldered men bent under heavy portage-loads and of women with a crude cameo beauty of face and figure—this story-stick of his life, from its rounded handle to its tapering end, was completed now.

CHAPTER XXI: HOW TO DAMN AN ENEMY

A TAKUDAH brought word to Endurance of a strange happening at En Traverse Lake. He had been fishing there at an inlet for barbuttes, he said—half-asleep that morning, with the fish line tied around his big toe. A thundering sound in the sky had roused him; and looking up, he had beheld a fearful thing come out of the southern horizon and roar out over the lake.

The sight of it, said John Afraid-of-his-Squaw, had nearly tumbled him from his boat. The thing was shaped like a mosquito-hawk or dragonfly, and it beat its wings so fast that one could not see them move at all. It was huge, with the wing-spread of several eagles, and had a body bigger than a *chug-chug* canoe. It flew twice as swiftly as the sickle-billed curlew; and though it was several miles away, he had distinctly heard the thunder of its flight.

It had lit down on the water, he said, near Goose Point. And behold, a few minutes later it rose and started across the lake for the south shore. He had watched it no longer, but scurried to the bank and crawled in among some rocks; for the dreadful thing might have been hungry and questing for food. . . .

Afraid-of-his-Squaw's story was variously received at Endurance. Some folk thought he had got hold of a bottle of "twisted iron" and seen visions. Others believed he had glimpsed a golden eagle larger than ordinary and his imagination had done the rest. A few

thought that he really might have seen an airplane, a cartographer machine or perhaps a stray craft of the big mining companies that were combing the North with planes on the hunt for rich deposits.

Frank Pedneault listened very thoughtfully to the Indian's story, and then began drawing some conclusions of his own. To him this Indian's shiny monster was a possible key to many puzzles. After hearing the account, he stood in the barracks doorway sucking a goose-quill toothpick, and gazed long and meditatively into the northeast.

To the best of his recollection he had never yet seen Alan Baker throw down a job merely because it was tough. And he knew that Baker had been heart and soul determined to wipe out that first stinging defeat and save Joyce MacMillan's dad. Bill had intimated that Alan had gone after those bandits; without violating his oath of secrecy, he had dropped a few broad hints to that effect.

It had stumped Pedneault to explain why Alan had gone out to Edmonton. And Bill Hardsock going a. w. o. l., a clean drop out of sight—what was behind that? And now a mysterious airplane in this lonely country, and its careful avoidance of Fort Endurance, where it naturally ought to have put in for supplies. . . .

Pedneault drew a conclusion: "Alan went out and got himself a flying machine to hunt them men out of the Thal-Azzah or make that Inconnu trip. He and Bill arranged to meet somewheres. He picked Bill up and now they're over there together on the rousingest trick in a coon's age!"

As he stood in the barracks door gazing wistfully across the Mackenzie to the distant hills, he felt all deserted by his comrades. "And they left *me* out in the cold. Didn't tell me one damned thing about it. To hell

with 'em both! But Lord! I wish—on a trick like that —oh Lord, I wish . . ."

Not absolutely sure of his conclusions, he started out along the grassy terrace toward Mrs. Drummond's flower garden where Elizabeth Spaulding was reading. He was pondering, in vague outline, a trick of his own. It was a serious matter, and he wanted to be certain of his guess before he cut loose with a scheme like that. Elizabeth no doubt knew all about Alan's plans, since she was waiting here for him to return and marry her.

Elizabeth did know the story. Haskell had let her know. Not daring to go to her himself, he had employed Whipple to casually tell her that Baker had stolen valuable government property at Edmonton, had broken several flying regulations, and was certain of arrest and imprisonment the hour he showed up in civilization. No longer a Policeman, and having no authorization of any sort, Baker might even be charged with second-degree murder if he killed any of those bandits.

The news affected Elizabeth very little. Superintendent Williamson and Colonel Steele were both good friends of Alan's and both had power in high places. If his venture should be successful, they no doubt could get him clear. There is a lot of virtue, she reflected, in success.

When she saw Haskell and Whipple go away in the launch, heavily armed and secretive about their business, she suspected they were out to "get" Alan; and for three days she lived in a painful, throbbing uncertainty. If anything should happen to Alan, it would put her in a pretty fix! But when Haskell returned, empty-handed, muddied, mosquito-bitten, with a temper as snappish as a diamond-back turtle's, she knew

that his attempt had miserably failed. Alan had eluded him and gone on after those bandits. Instead of a prison term, he would probably get public praise—and that large reward.

When Pedneault came across and began asking roundabout questions concerning Alan and his venture, Elizabeth told him what she knew, and also told him her opinion of Haskell for trying to stop so brave and difficult an attempt. She knew that Pedneault would repeat her words to Alan, if he got the chance; and Alan would thus hear from another person of her steadfast loyalty to him.

Very thoughtful, when he found out his guess had been correct, Pedneault walked back across the terrace to the mission hospital where Larry Younge was propped up in a chair beside a window. For twenty minutes, leaning over the sill, Pedneault conferred with Larry in low tones.

From there, he went over to Haskell's cabin, knocked, and entered.

Haskell was shaving. He turned around and snapped:

"Well, what is it?"

"Sir, a *méti* called Adolphe brought word of trouble down river in an Indian camp. The Smokies, several families of 'em, have got hold of some 'permit,' and they're quarreling, fighting——"

"Well, let them fight!" Haskell said irritably. "I can't send a patrol. I'm too short-handed here."

"But sir, it'd take only three hours. I could handle it myself. I've straightened out messes like that. I could be there and back in the launch by mid-afternoon, with your permission."

"I said you can't go. I need the launch myself in a little while."

Pedneault cleared his throat nervously. "Sir, I know it's not my place to say a thing like this, but—just a mere suggestion, sir—Superintendent Williamson is coming here on the next down-boat, probably tomorrow evening; and he's always very vexed about Indians getting hold of 'permit' and killing each other in drunken brawls. He's always pleased when we nail a camp like that, sir."

It was a consummate stroke, his reference to Williamson. Larry Younge had prompted him to that.

Haskell took thought. If he sent a man and smoothed out this Indian trouble, it would look very well in a report. It would be a positive action, an achievement. Properly written up, or told personally to Williamson, it would reflect credit. . . . A drunken riotous camp, several score of Indians just on the verge of butchering each other, *his* dispatch of a patrol, a big whisky-smuggling ring completely broken up.

He said: "All right. Go down and reduce them to order. But be back here in three hours. I want that laun——"

Pedneault was already on his way up to barracks for rifle, belt-gun and keys from Whipple. Down at the wharf, he hurriedly tanked up on gas and put in a big drum extra. Jumping in, slipping into the wheel seat, he stuck a pipe between his teeth, jammed his hat low over his eyes, yanked the starter chain and swung out upon the broad river.

A little puzzled by these preparations and all this haste, Haskell stepped outside his cabin. As he stood there, watching Pedneault's demoniac driving, watching the scarlet-and-gold launch vanish in its own spray down the Mackenzie, he heard a feeble shout up the terrace behind him; and he turned and looked at the hospital.

At that moment Larry Younge, leaning forward in his padded chair, was shaking a fist out the window and emitting a weak—

"*Yee-oow!* Three whoops for Ped!"

It was Haskell's intention, as soon as Pedneault came back with the launch, to take Whipple and make a trip up the Big Alooska. Baker would probably use the MacMillan Trading Post as a maneuvering base against the bandits. By muffling the motor over the last few miles the launch could slip up quietly. They would not be expecting him to strike a second blow; they likely would be up at the trading store; and at best it would take them ten full minutes to tow the plane out, revv up and rise out of the narrow cramped river.

But as he sat there in his cabin, planning this blow, Haskell doubted if he was to succeed. A kind of fatalism had laid hold of him. In his feud with Baker he had been successful in the main, but what did all his triumph mean, when he had lost Elizabeth Spaulding? His victory had been a barren one. He saw that she was going to marry Alan Baker. In these last weeks the prophetic knowledge of that marriage had been a waking nightmare. Day by day it was marching closer and he was powerless to halt it.

He was beginning to realize that insofar as Elizabeth was concerned, he was in the clutch of circumstances beyond his power to fight. He was beginning to bow his head to the inevitable.

When four hours passed and Pedneault failed to return with the launch, Haskell began to get suspicious. Five hours, six—and Pedneault still absent. Haskell finally went across to the hospital and demanded of Larry Younge:

"What were you and Pedneault talking about before he came to my cabin?"

Larry never smiled. "I don't exactly mind, but I think we were talking about the weather. Ped said he hoped it ain't going to rain any more."

"You're lying! What made you lean out of the window and yell at him?"

"Couldn't help it. I like to see Ped drive that launch. He does it bee-yu-tifly."

Haskell snarled: "You're laughing in my face. You hatched some deviltry with him." He threatened viciously: "I'll fix you, constable. You're to be invalided out of service. I've got something to say about the terms. When you're hobbling around, trying to live on a few dollars a month, you won't be quite so damned chipper!"

Over at the trading store he questioned Factor Drummond.

"Did you see a half-breed called Adolphe come into the post any time today?"

Drummond was haggling with an Indian over some puppies. . . . "John, them pups aren't worth a chew of tobacco. They're half-wolf and they've got snappish dispositions already. But I'll give you five dollars for them—in trade." He glanced up at Haskell. "Adolphe, you say? No 'breed by that name around here that I know of."

"You're sure?"

"Why yes, unless . . ."

"What?"

Knowing nothing of Pedneault's stratagem, Drummond said unwittingly: "Adolphe is a trick name among these men. Like 'Let George do it.' They often crack jokes on ignorant recruits and *cheechakos* with that name. Why are you asking me?"

In a seething fury Haskell turned away without answering. Pedneault had tricked him, stolen the launch, and joined Baker's venture!

Unable now to go up the Alooska and smash that plane, he found outlet for his bitterness in avenging plans, vengeance against Alan Baker and those men. At Williamson's coming visit he could deal them some terrible blows. Without doing any wishful thinking, he saw that his own position was stronger, far stronger than it ever had been. His enemies had played into his very hands. Baker had bought out under suspicious circumstances, had made a criminal of himself, had taken the law into his own hands and turned justice to private ends. Pedneault had given a false report and absconded with Police property. Bill Hardsock had stolen supplies and subverted them to his own uses, had gone a. w. o. l., had aided in a criminal enterprise, and to crown it all, had deserted.

Knowing Williamson's foibles pretty well, Haskell foresaw the superintendent's anger when he learned those blunt facts. They violated every tenet in the stern old officer's code, for he was a stickler for discipline. He would soak Hardsock and Pedneault to the limit. He would turn thumbs down on any leniency toward Baker. The ex-sergeant would be branded with disgrace, if he escaped the pen. He would see his partners sent over the road for helping him. And if he did get those bandits, he had awaiting him the news that Trader MacMillan, whose innocence he had championed, for whose sake he had done all this and whose vindication had been his great purpose—that Dave MacMillan, broken by shame and bitterness, was lying dead, a suicide, at Resolution.

Haskell saw that his only real difficulty lay in overcoming Williamson's earlier prejudice and winning his

personal liking. That called for shrewd psychology, but on that point he knew he could make Alan Baker look like a stammering farm boy. Planning his talk with Williamson, he jotted down notes on important matters:

Suggest don't punish Hardsock or Pedneault. Will seem magnam. of me, and will only make W. the more determined.

Say Baker good man. Praise him highly. Sorry he left. Suggest he bought out because failed commission. Remark it was only natural.

If anything said about me being incompetent, say modestly I'm new here. Listened to advice exper. subordinates.

Let W. know about my inheritance. Will think it splendid of me to remain in service when wealthy.

Don't divulge I tried to stop Baker's plan or arrest him. Say tried to help.

Above all, give Baker best of praise. Surest way to damn him. Don't betray any personal hostility.

As he went on planning his clever mixture of lies and truth, he felt confident he would win the superintendent's approbation.

The next evening, when Williamson arrived, Haskell first of all took him on an inspection tour of the post. Finished with that, they stopped and talked together on the slope, a little distance from the barracks. A respectful distance behind them Corporal Whipple waited, note-paper in hand, ready to scrape and salute if they glanced his way or asked for any figures. Half-a-dozen Indian men, loafing around the post, kept staring in awe at the two *tyee Shagalasha.* The purple shadows of evening were lengthening out over the Mackenzie, but across the river the late sun still stood warm and mellow on Alan Baker's wilderness of pine hills.

Haskell was elated, he was secretly exultant, at his success so far in "working" his superior officer. Williamson was openly pleased with the inspection. Barracks, cabins, dog teams, canoes, guns—everything was in capital shape. Usually so sparing of praise, the old officer had said warmly: "Haskell, you've got the most regimental post along the whole Three Rivers. The post is a compliment to you and a credit to the Force."

Bent on making a good outward showing, it did not matter at all to Haskell that a band of Indians, two hundred miles west in the sub-Arctic Rockies, were dying of smallpox, and that his men, instead of whitewashing stones along the barracks walks, should have been sent out there to fight that scourge and keep it from spreading to the *Yukon-iho-Tannah.* It did not matter that the Pelican Channel and Wolf River 'breeds were quarreling over trapping grounds, that one man had been murdered, that an ugly feud was brewing and ought to be sharply halted. What did matter to Haskell, he was making a fine showing and pulling the wool over Williamson's eyes and strengthening his defenses against Alan Baker.

This auspicious beginning was all well enough, he felt, but his trouble with Baker was the all-crucial thing. It was going to make or break him. The whole outcome depended on Williamson; depended on whether the division commander would believe his story or Baker's. As yet he did not know what Williamson thought. The superintendent had heard a few of the bare facts on his way down the Mackenzie, but he had left headquarters before Baker's buying-out papers had reached there for his signature. He had taken no stock in pick-up rumors, and had dropped no hint of his opinions.

Haskell decided that the old officer had been favor-

ably prepared for the story now; and he led into it gradually, shrewdly. Starting with the *Midnight Sun* robbery, he gave a detailed account of this last month, down to the hour when Pedneault stole the launch and joined Baker's venture.

"What hurts me the worst, sir," he added, with a consummate show of real sorrow, "is the refusal of these men to coöperate with me or let me help them. Maybe I'm at fault; I don't know. But just by way of example, sir, if Corporal Hardsock had told me about needing gas and oil, he could have had every drop at the post. But he wouldn't tell me; he st—— I mean, he took it. An Indian brought me word about him waiting at En Traverse Lake for Baker. I figured Baker might need extra supplies or help, so with Whipple I went down there right away. We tried desperately to get in connection with Baker. Even shot signals for him to wait. But he scorned our offer."

"Hmmph! That seems a bit small of him—to throw you down when you wanted to help him on his private venture."

"When I got back here," Haskell went on, "I planned to go up the Alooska and take him supplies. I wanted to put everything I had at his disposal. He's the best man-hunter in the country, and I felt he would get those criminals if anybody could. I didn't give a damn—if you'll pardon me, sir—about him being so hostile to me personally. All I cared about was to help him run down those bandits. If they escape, it will be a blot on the splendid record here at Endurance. But, as I explained, Pedneault told me a lie about some trouble at an Indian camp, and ran off with the launch."

As he watched his superior's reactions, Haskell smiled to himself. His generous praise of an enemy was having its calculated effect. He was doubly-

damning Baker by praising him. He was gaining Williamson's sympathy, his approbation. He had beaten down the old officer's former prejudice against him, and had instilled a subtle hostility against Baker and the two deserters.

For moments afterwards Williamson made no comment. Surprised and alarmed at discovering this bad blood here at an important post, the old officer gazed silently down upon the purpling river.

His gray eyes, which through forty years of self-sacrificing service, had looked upon human weakness and hardships and heroisms, were filled with a profound sorrow. What cut him to the quick was this blow at his faith in Alan Baker. He had always liked Alan, had trusted him as he trusted few men; and had fought for his promotion. Not two months ago he had made a heavy sacrifice of personnel and appropriation in his division in trade for a promise that Baker would be the next man commissioned in the Mounted. He had done all this because he believed that Alan was made of that Roman stuff to produce a splendid officer and leader of northern men. He himself, who had given forty years of his life to the service at a miserable salary; who with his brother officers of the old guard had unselfishly watched other men of their generation carve out fortunes in timber, ranches, land and mines in the developing West—he had thought of Baker as of one to carry on that tradition and spirit of loyalty to the Force.

Now, according to Inspector Haskell's account, Baker had quit because his commission last fall had not come. At the beck of a higher salary he had tossed aside loyalty and his invaluable work here in the North. He had made a miserable failure of a patrol, had im-

bued the other men with insubordination, and then bought out.

The story sounded so incredible of Alan Baker that Williamson at first did not believe it. In his wise way he asked himself: What is the human element behind this trouble? Might Haskell be an enemy to Baker and so have given a false version of the affair? But that couldn't be so; it was a flagrant injustice to the inspector. Haskell had gone out of his way, had humbled himself and his office, to try to help Baker. And just now in his account he had had nothing but praise for the sergeant. . . . "Baker was worth any three men, sir—dependable, steady, hard-working. He talks all the Indian languages, he knows conditions here to the last jot, he's a thorough northern man. . . ."

Stern and impartial, Williamson could not help feeling that Haskell, though a newcomer and not fully experienced yet, had been fair, and more than fair, in this trouble with Baker and these other men. Baker had certainly had a fearful moral lapse from the man he used to be. Without doubt his failure to get commissioned had set him brooding and had worked a pernicious harm on a once-superlative man.

As he looked thoughtfully at Haskell, Williamson considered it very creditable of him to praise a man who had done him so much injury. And he thought it showed exceptional stuff in the inspector to remain in service, to stick with his hard thankless work here in the North, when he had come into a large inheritance and might be leading a pleasant life in Ottawa. Playing no favorites whatsoever but trying to give every man his just dues, the old officer felt that his former uncharitable opinion of Haskell had been entirely wrong, as wrong and misplaced as his faith in Alan Baker.

Presently, in slow decisive tones, he said: "You did

right to demote Baker after that patrol. It was foolhardy of him to split his detail. Constable Younge over there will pay the price of that mistake for the rest of his life. And about those other men, I think the rough sledding you've had with them is easily explained. Baker was in charge before you came; he was rather lax on discipline so long as the work got done. One of the things urged against him when he was up for commission was the fact that he was too familiar with his subordinates. When you came and insisted on stricter discipline, I presume they resented it. The fault is theirs, not yours. I'm backing you to the limit against them and against Baker too, if he tries to stir up any further trouble."

Haskell drew a deep breath. His story had gone across handsomely. In half an hour of skillful talk he had accomplished more than Baker could match in a month of labor and heavy expense and danger. He had shot the white-water rapids in his frail craft and was floating serenely in the quiet pool below.

CHAPTER XXII: THE ZERO HOUR

For Alan and Featherof there at MacMillan's trading post after their discovery of the catastrophe, the waiting was the worst of it—the long hour after hour of grim, self-enforced delay.

"We've got to let them get out of the timber country into the open Thal-Azzah," Alan spoke to Buzzard, who was looking to his experience and leadership in this fraught crisis. "There we can be sure of sighting their canoes. They'll have no shelter there, when we drop down on them. We'll make ourselves give them a fifteen-hour start on us."

It was his cold man-hunting wisdom that spoke; but all his being clamored to start instantly, flinging himself against those men and tearing Joyce away from them before twilight fell. The long evening and the hours of semi-darkness would have been unbearable if he and Buzzard had not driven themselves to certain tasks.

Up in the trading hall he fashioned a pair of grappling hooks from sled-runner iron. From the middle of the canoe landing he grappled up and down and as far out into the current as he could reach.

After an hour's search he found what he had thought to find.

Buzzard quit work on the plane and came to him and stood looking down as Alan cut away the thongs holding the weight-rocks. Ordinarily Alan would have made a careful inquiry into the manner of old Dad Pence's death and have asked Buzzard to witness his

inquest, so as to have court-sure proof. But he made no examination, and he did not speak save to ask his partner to fetch a shroud of canvas from the storage shed.

It was not his intention to bring those five men to judgment before any human court.

He spent another hour at digging on a slope back of the post, and carrying heavy stones to build a cairn. Afterwards, with an ax at his belt, he climbed a tall pine tree that stood alone and conspicuous on a nearby knoll, and lopped off all its branches up to its rounded crown. It was such a lobstick as old Pence himself would have wished for.

Towards twilight he brought the machine gun out of the fuselage cubby, set it up on the landing, examined it with great care, and then drummed away a few dozen rounds at a rock down the river, to brush up his hand and eye.

A little later he forced himself to go up to the trading store and cook a meal, for they had eaten nothing since dawn. That was an hour of torture, there in the kitchen. Joyce seemed present with him. He seemed to feel her presence in a way that shook even his staunch nerves. All afternoon a dread had haunted him. . . . He remembered the little automatic Joyce always carried; remembered the hard bulge of it that time he lifted her down from the window. Knowing her spirited pride, her passionate nature, he had fearfully imagined her choosing a proud escape from her horror. And now that feeling of her presence almost unnerved him. In the flickering candle light he seemed to see her coming out of her room or standing tiptoe at a shelf; and in the stricken silence of the post he could hear her quick light step nearing him, never quite reaching him . . .

When he and Buzzard had forced themselves to eat supper and were putting things in order again, as though for Joyce to come back and find, they heard a far-away drone miles down the Big Alooska. A breeze whipped the faint sound away for several minutes. When they caught it again, the sound was clear and unmistakable. They once had heard that same low throaty drone approaching across En Traverse Lake to destroy their plane and stop their venture.

Alan rose up, with an expression on his face that frightened Buzzard.

"It's Haskell. He's coming to smash us. He didn't quit with that one attempt. I don't think—even if he knew that you and I are all that stands between Joyce and a horror—I don't think he'd hesitate a second. Buzzard, you stay here. I'm going down to the landing. I don't want you to be involved in—I suppose it'll be called murder."

He went out through the trading hall and down to the landing, and crouched there behind the machine gun. With his hand on the spade grip, training the weapon down river, he waited.

To save the plane, it was his intention to open fire the moment the launch swung around the first bend below. He was visioning Joyce in one of those bandit canoes, the prisoner of that whaler mate who intended to "keep her for himself." He saw her glancing fearfully around the horizon for a sight of the airplane, and imagined her deepening horror if that plane never came. There was no hesitancy, no compunction in his heart.

But then, as he listened to that launch tearing wide-open up the treacherous Alooska, he grew convinced that Whipple never would or could drive it at so de-

moniac a clip. Frank Pedneault was the man behind that wheel.

Uncertain, in a dilemma, he reasoned: "Haskell might have forced him to make the trip. But Ped would never throw himself into it like that, he'd never risk his life that way, unless it was something he felt like putting all his heart into."

Lifting the binoculars, he focused them on the first bend below. When the launch came tearing into sight and thundered on up toward the post, he saw at a glance that it carried but one man—a man with his hat jammed low on his eyes and a dead pipe in his teeth.

Swinging the launch around in midstream like a toy, Pedneault gently nosed it in beside the plane. Alan stepped forward, grasped the painter and lapped it around a pier-head as Pedneault leaped out upon the planking.

"Thank Lord, you're here, Alan. . . . Was afraid you'd be gone——"

"Ped! What are you doing up here? You're on some patrol?"

"Patrol hell!" Pedneault panted, breathless and excited. "I caught onto your idea. Elizabeth told me about it, too. She's aching for you to win out. Larry and I talked it over. I said, 'By Lord, I'm going, Larry! I'm going to be in on that with Alan and Bill!' So I euchred the launch away from Haskell, pitched off, and streaked for here. Brought you some extra gas if you need any."

Alan was staggered.

"Good Lord! And *you've deserted too,* Ped!"

"But I couldn't miss out on a trick like this, could I? Most he can give me is a few months in the butter-tub and kick me out on my ear."

Alan winced. Here was Pedneault mixed up in his trouble. Like an eager wolf-hound whom his master has left behind, Ped had chewed his collar and come along on the hunt.

"Where's Bill and Joyce?" Pedneault asked. "And what's the matter with you, Alan? You look . . . What's happened?"

In half a dozen sentences Alan told him. Pedneault's face grew long, his eager excitement sobered down. He glanced up at the trading post where Joyce often had welcomed him when he passed on hard patrols; and as he thought of her in the power of those bandits, with her father lying dead at Resolution, his thirst for a "rousing trick" against those criminals gave place to a mood something akin to Alan's.

He decided it was better to say nothing just now about Dave's suicide. Alan had enough anxiety preying on him.

"I'm thankful for that gasoline," Alan said. "And for you throwing in with us, Ped, at the price you'll pay. But I don't see how you can help. We can't carry a third person on this trip. I'll have to have room to work the machine gun——"

"Then I'll go in the launch."

"You can't make it. Above the Alooska Forks there's twenty miles of low water that you can't get through."

"I can make it now. I know what the launch can do. After all these heavy rains, draining down that left fork from the Thal-Azzah . . . Look there—" he pointed at the water stage on a pier—"that's eighteen inches higher than when we made our first patrol after them. I can get through; and once I'm in those deep-water channels of the Thal-Azzah——"

"All right," Alan agreed. "You'll be a mighty big

help. If they put us out of it, you'll be in position to carry on with them. Let's go up to the post and make our arrangements. You'll be leaving ahead of us."

Meeting Buzzard in the trading hall, he introduced Pedneault and explained. They went on back to the kitchen and worked out their plans.

Pedneault was to leave at dawn in the launch. The plane would leave at ten o'clock. Passing Pedneault just inside the Thal-Azzah, the plane would fly on ahead, locate the bandits and bring them to bay. The two craft would thus close in together for the battle.

It looked like a good plan. With his powerful glasses, searching from five thousand feet in the air, Alan knew he could sight the bandits long before they could hear the plane. They would be out in the open Many Waters, with no chance to hide, with no shelter when it came down to rifle talk. Launch and plane and machine guns were heavy odds against them.

There was but one hitch in the plan. All three men were aware of it, but no one mentioned it. Those bandits had Joyce with them; they could and would use her for protection. How could they be swept with a machine gun's deadly spray when she was with them?

It was something which had to be left to luck or fate.

Buzzard arranged a wing-dip signal code with Pedneault, to give him directions in the crisscross waterways of the Thal-Azzah.

Alan gave final instructions: "If anything happens to the plane, don't try to fight those five men by yourself, Pedneault. Swing wide of them, go on east to that big lake I mapped for you, and join Bill there. Then the two of you fight them to a finish.

"One other thing. I don't want Buzzard or myself to be charged with murder. You're in service, Pedneault;

you'll not only be on a legitimate patrol, but you have the power to deputize us as special constables. We'd better put that down in black and white."

It seemed strange to Pedneault, who had sworn in half-breeds and Indian scouts and dog-team drivers on emergency occasions, to be swearing in his former Officer Commanding in so lowly a capacity. He wrote out the formal authorization: James A. Featherof; status, special constable temporary; capacity, aviator. Alan McCleod Baker; status, special constable temporary; capacity, scout and machine-gunner.

At the earliest hint of dawn they went down to the landing, inspected the launch and lashed Joyce's light canoe on the stern half-deck. Pedneault shook hands with them, slipped into the wheel seat, and set out alone, a solitary figure, up the Big Alooska.

Waiting, nervous and jumpy, as both had waited for zero hours in France, Alan and Buzzard stalked about the unutterably lonely post. Buzzard wandered into Joyce's room and found a book and desperately tried to read. Alan dared not go in there.

At the storage shed, as he looked at the peltry Joyce had taken in and neatly baled, he remembered that night when she stamped her tiny foot at him and called him a man-hunting wolf. At least she had been spirited toward him then, even if it were defiance. But yesterday, so casual and quiet with him—he meant no more than a friendly acquaintance to her now. If he saved her, she would be grateful with all her heart. She might listen to him; she might even . . . But no! He wanted more than gratitude. After his miserable, half-hearted relations with Elizabeth, he wanted the ideal or none.

At nine o'clock, drawn down to the landing, they went over the plane for the third time, and Alan

mounted the machine gun in the cockpit. When their zero hour came, he towed the craft out into midstream, held it there while Buzzard warmed the spluttering motor; and then, sending the canoe spinning with a kick, he sprang up into his seat.

Buzzard lifted the plane out of the river, climbed to five thousand feet, and headed into the northeast.

CHAPTER XXIII: THE SWAN NEST

THIRTY miles above the Alooska Forks, they caught up with Pedneault. Far-away beneath them, the launch was driving steadily up the left branch.

When he saw that all was going well with Pedneault, Alan turned his glasses ahead again, sweeping the dozen waterways within vision. Unexpectedly a dark flitting blur seemed to pass across the lenses. Turning the binoculars back to it, catching it in clear focus, he picked up two tiny black objects creeping up a broad blue channel ten miles on into the Thal-Azzah.

Signaling Pedneault that they had sighted the canoes, Buzzard slowed down to stalling speed. Alan studied the waterways spread beneath them, and mapped a route for the launch to take. The bandits were in the first channel to the north. Half-way between the launch and the canoes, a creek led north from the Alooska branch to the broad blue channel. The motorboat could cross there, and have a straight shoot down upon the canoes.

When they signaled directions to Pedneault, and repeated them, and he answered back that he understood, they saw him open out the launch till a long narrow V-wake of white froth stretched behind it. Then, winging on ahead, they closed in for the battle.

As they drew near and Buzzard dropped to a couple thousand feet, Alan began to make out figures in the two craft. His heart leaped as he counted six persons. Nearer still, he distinguished a slender girlish fig-

ure in the prow of the lead canoe. They must have found that gun on Joyce, or else she had clung to her faith that he would save her.

The plane closed up, less than a thousand feet high. The two canoes just then were crossing a good-sized lake dotted with boggy islets and reed beds and fringed with tall dense flags. As the machine roared overhead, Alan looked down and saw those men, faces up-turned, staring at the plane. As though realizing that the machine was their enemy, that their enemy had at last run them to earth, they were making ominous warning gestures with their rifles.

Half-rising, Alan glanced back westward to find how near Pedneault was. A puzzled expression crept over his face as he failed to glimpse the launch in either the Alooska branch or the broad blue channel. With a premonition of disaster clutching him, he whipped up the glasses, focused on the connecting creek, and caught the big boat in clear vision.

The thing he saw brought a cry into his throat.

The craft was not moving. It lay on its side, half out of water, hopelessly stranded. Either from reckless piloting or from an accident no man could have averted, Pedneault had struck a mud bar hidden under the treacherous muskeg water; and now the scarlet-and-gold launch, lodged solidly in the muck by the momentum of its headlong dash, was out of the battle for good and all. Pedneault could not even go on and help Bill.

Alan tore his gaze away from this disaster. It was all up to him and Buzzard now. Pedneault was out, the launch was out; Bill was a hundred miles away, and alone.

He tilted the Browning muzzle downward and steadied himself to run a burst at the rear canoe. But that

craft darted up alongside the leading boat and hovered there, protected against his machine gun by their nearness to Joyce. With sullen faces up-turned, the bandits watched the maneuvering plane, waiting for Alan's next move, defying him to touch them.

Buzzard had banked in a neat hairpin turn, had dropped down to six hundred feet and was flying back past, a hundred yards off the vertical, so that Alan could fire down at them diagonally and double his concentration by ricocheting bullets off the water. It was a superb position. Alan could have killed those five bandits and sunk their canoes in half a minute. But he dared not fire a shot.

It was in that space of hopeless deadlock that Joyce came through. He had known she would understand his situation. He had expected her to put up some spirited fight to help him and Buzzard. But her bold swift move and the smashing success of it was more than he had dared pray for.

He saw her make him some slight sign, a mere gesture which the bandits, leering up at him, did not see. He read the meaning of that gesture; Joyce was preparing for some sudden action; she was signaling him to be ready!

Without a whisper of warning, so swiftly and neatly that the bandits looked around in dazed bewilderment, she half-rose in the canoe, dived headlong over the gunwale, and disappeared.

It came so suddenly that for moments Alan himself hardly comprehended what she had done. When he did realize that she had given him his splendid chance, his finger tightened on the trigger and the Browning leaped into play.

For twenty seconds, till there was danger of Joyce reappearing, he flailed and swept the two canoes with a

rain of bullets. He was shooting wide, the plane had passed a little out of good range, his concentration was yards away from them, and the throbbing swaying cockpit was all different from the concrete pill-boxes he had been accustomed to. But he hit the canoes with half a dozen ricocheting bullets. He scorched one man, who jumped and yelled. The deadly hail drove them pellmell in terror of their lives, into shelter of the nearest flags.

Fifty feet from where she had dived, Joyce reappeared a moment, cast a frightened glance back, tossed the disheveled hair from her eyes, swam a stroke or two, and then flipped under again like a young otter, making for a soggy reed bed on the other side of the lake.

"Low! Fly low!" Alan shouted into Buzzard's ears. "Sweep low over 'em! They'll try to get her again if we don't force the fight now!"

With rifles snarling at them from the flags below, with white puffs of smoke drifting away on the breeze, the plane banked and dived; and less than four hundred feet high, it soared over the bandits, its third time, its last and fatal time. . . .

Nearly flung out bodily by the quick wrenching maneuvers, Alan braced himself and hung grimly to the Browning and ran a burst at the flags that the bandits were firing from. He killed a man; he saw the criminal fling up his arms and stagger and fall face downward in the reeds and water. With another burst, enfilading those flags from a side angle, he would have wiped out the other four.

But that chance was not given him.

The thunder of the engine suddenly slackened, the motor spluttered and died; in place of the throbbing roar Alan heard only the swish of struts and hum of

wires. In the sudden quiet he heard Buzzard's cry of consternation and saw his flight partner turn a white face toward him; and he guessed the engine had been put out of commission by those snarling rifles in the flags below.

The next instant, with those rifles still blazing away, a tremor seemed to hit the plane, as though other bullets had struck it. It lurched violently, its nose and right wing dropped, and it started a steep side-slip. With a gesture of sickened despair at this second mortal blow, Buzzard cut off ignition and battled with stick and rudder-bar to keep the plane from plummeting into the bog under keel.

In a measure he succeeded. He worked the disabled craft into a steep lurching glide, and fought it down and down; but it twisted and spun fearfully, and came down like a great wing-broken bird.

Two-thirds of a mile from the bandits, it fell heavily into the water on one wing and pontoon, rocked a moment uncertainly, righted itself and floated—but disabled, useless, out of the battle.

Before the spray from the plane's heavy fall had fairly settled, Alan was on his feet, stripping off helmet and jacket, looking back at the flags where the bandits lay hidden and the reedy bog where Joyce had found a temporary refuge.

For a moment, numbed by this sudden crash of all his plans, he stared hopelessly across that watery thousand yards. The launch was stranded, miles away; Pedneault and Bill were both out of the reckoning; the plane was disabled; the bandits were free to recapture Joyce and escape in their canoes. In the space of five minutes his whole venture had come to nothing.

After the first shock had passed, Alan shook himself

doggedly and his indomitable courage rose again. A fighting anger at his luck swept through him and brushed away that feeling of terrible helplessness. Thinking in quick flashes, he fought to see how he might salvage something out of all this wreckage.

From the bandit's covert to the bog where Joyce was hiding was a scant two hundred yards. Whatever move he tried, he must act swiftly. In a very few minutes, when those men recovered their wits, they were going to seize their advantage; they were going to whip across, beat through those flags and find her again. She would never flit out of their hands a second time.

Whirling on Buzzard, he demanded sharply:

"What happened to the plane? They shot us down, but the damage——?"

"Can't say. Have to look. A couple controls are dead. Bullets must've cut the leads."

"You can't taxi back there? Can't get me close enough to use the Browning?"

"Can't taxi a foot. Motor's out too. They hit something; that's why the engine konked on us. There's a bullet-hole through the right louvre. Think the wire to the timber box is cut."

"How long—us to fix that?"

"That'd be quick. But the control leads—different matter. Take us an hour."

Even as Buzzard spoke, Alan saw the bandits rise up yonder in the flags and start shoving their canoes into the water. They were going to dart across and recapture Joyce.

At the sight of that, his last hesitancy was swept away. Snapping around to the fuselage cubby, he jerked out the frail canvas canoe and unfolded it. Buzzard had been thrusting pliers, wrench and tape into

his pockets, but now he stopped and stared wide-eyed at his partner.

"Good Lord! You don't intend . . . ?"

"What else? Stand here and watch them hunt her down?"

"But man, you can't go up against them in that soap-bubble! Don't be crazy. You can't use the Browning in that boat. No stance for it——"

"I know it. Won't try. Going to make a dash for that reed clump over there near them."

"Across that open water? Right into their rifles? Them shooting into you from cover? Alan, don't! For God's sake, don't try that!"

Alan jammed the last thwart-prop into its notch, lifted the canoe one-handed down upon the water, flung in the paddle and jumped down upon a float.

"Hand me the Browning and the cartridge webs. Come alive! Don't you see they're starting across to get Joyce? Why shouldn't I go after them on open water? Larry Younge did once. Hand those things down!"

"But wait! Let's try to figure——"

"Figure what? You're down, the launch is stuck, in ten minutes they'll have Joyce, and then we can't lift a hand against them." He laid the heavy gun and cartridge belts into the boat and stepped in.

"All right, then," Buzzard gave in. "But if you're going . . ." He seized the second paddle, caught up the light rifle which had been Joyce's, and flung a leg over the cockpit edge. "I'm in on that, son."

Alan fended him back with an arm. "Stay here! That's what I mean! You can't help—out there. If you'd go, if they'd sink the boat, we'd both be out. Get busy on this plane. Fix it. You've got her rifle to fight 'em away from you. If they put me out of business, you

can whip down and get Pedneault and fly over to join Bill. You three can carry it on with them."

He pushed off Buzzard's restraining hand, skirled away from the plane and headed west toward that acre of thick flags where the bandits had been driven to cover.

Pliers in hand but his work forgotten, Buzzard climbed upon a wing to watch the outcome of that fearfully uneven battle.

Alan's goal was a little patch of reeds three hundred and fifty yards from the bandits. It was a miserable place to fight from, when those four rifles yonder would be snarling at him from perfect hiding. The patch was merely a few yards square; the reeds, only a couple feet high, were so sparse that one could see through the clump; and the approach to it across that open water was a gantlet of death.

But it was all the cover Alan saw, and it was better at least than nothing. The reeds meant that the water there was shallow enough for him to plant the Browning. By paddling up fast with the canoe bow-on, he believed he might get to the flags. Once there, once the Browning leaped into play, he could smother those rifles in a few seconds.

The bandits had been shoving their heavily-laden canoes back through the flags to the open water of the pond lying between them and Joyce. But when they saw him skirling away from the plane, they stopped and watched him for a few moments until his intention became unmistakable. Alan saw them hold a quick council. And then, as though realizing how deadly that open water stretch was, how impossible to cross in the face of four rifles, they pulled the canoes back and secreted themselves in the flags and coolly waited.

When he was still two hundred yards from the reed patch and nearly six hundred from the bandits, they opened on him. A rifle boomed dully like a caribou Winchester, and its heavy bullet ricocheted off the water a dozen feet to his left. Another barked at him. A third kicked up spume a little nearer. Then the fourth, a sharp-cracking Savage, spoke out. Better aimed, in the hands of a deadly marksman, it sent a bullet so close past Alan's ear that involuntarily he winced and bent lower.

As he drove the clumsy canoe straight on with powerful strokes, the thought flashed across his mind that the Dogrib 'breed, this André whom Chink Woolley had mentioned, was handling that sharp-speaking Savage yonder. The 'breed had carried a Savage on the *Midnight Sun* and it had been he who drilled Jimmy Montgomery through the heart.

With that first bullet clipping so close past him, Alan realized that the *méti* knew his gun and the range, and was a murderous shot. A little fearfully he speculated, "Missing by inches at six hundred yards, what will that glint-eyed 'breed do at three hundred and fifty?" A warning whispered: "You'll never make it; that 'breed'll drill you. One of those sharp-points will come singing your way and *splaat* into you. . . ."

Against his better judgment he drove straight ahead. The fire on his quickened as he cut down the range. Bullets from the three heavier guns slugged into the water on both sides, or whanged past and struck beyond. Those three bandits were shooting too rapidly; they were relying not so much on aim as on a lucky bullet killing him. But the Savage *cr-aa-cked* deliberately, slowly, with a certain deadly assurance; and Alan flinched at its sharp report ringing across the water.

Its second bullet splintered a hole through the blade

of his paddle, up-lifted for a stroke. Its third, still closer, struck the water between paddle and canoe, ricocheted off, spun endwise and tore through the fat side of the canvas craft, missing the middle thwart by an inch. The fourth, elevated a little, sang past in air, harmlessly, but with a murderously close *wh-aa-ng* that jerked a gasp from his lips.

The fifth bullet hit Alan.

His left hand, gripping the paddle-end, was upraised for a stroke when the gun cracked. Before the report reached his ears, he felt a sharp blow on his left hand, and his grip was torn loose from the paddle. A fraction of a second later he heard the tremendously swift crescendo of the bullet which had come singing out across the water and which already had hit him.

His left hand felt numb and paralyzed. Glancing down at it, he saw the blood start spurting—falling in crimson splotches upon the white canvas. And then he saw that his ring finger, almost completely severed, hung by a mere shred of skin.

With one glance he realized his finger was beyond any surgery to restore. The dangling thing hampered his grip on the paddle. As though its loss was of no consequence in these moments of life and death, he took firm hold of it and pulled it off. The pain came then, in darting throbs that shot up to his elbow and made him shiver.

As he gripped the paddle and turned his eyes ahead again toward the thin patch of reeds, he was hit a second time, by the sixth and last bullet of the 'breed's magazine. For a second he was dazed, so dazed he could not realize where he had been struck. Then he felt a pain like a hot iron pressed along his forehead; and something warm and crimson began trickling down into his eyes, half-blinding him.

The Savage did not shoot again just then. The 'breed was evidently reloading and lowering his elevation sight. In the comparative silence, Alan became aware that Buzzard was hoarsely shouting at him. Dimly he heard the pleading frantic yells:

"Back away! For God's sake, back away! They'll kill you. Alan! Look across. To your right. Something like cover. . . . Back away, swing over there!"

Sickened by pain and bullet-shock, Alan scooped up a handful of water and dashed it across his eyes, so that he could see. Glancing north, vaguely wondering what cover Buzzard meant, he saw a little reed bed two hundred yards distant. It was a tiny thing, hardly bigger than the floor of a room. He had seen it from the plane; but it had been half-screened by a fringe of flags and had seemed no better a goal than the thin patch of reeds.

As he glanced at it now, he saw that it was dry ground, standing a foot above the water. A swan nest there, a huge structure of willow sticks and reeds and tussock heads, almost completely covered it.

Backing off a few dozen yards, he turned the canoe and flung his whole strength into reaching that swan nest.

His boat offered a broadside target now, a target so big that even the three heavy rifles quickly found it. His wounds were draining his strength away, though he did not feel or realize it; and a nausea was creeping over him. His breath was coming in great sobbing gasps. The trickle of red was blinding him. Repeatedly he swiped a shirt-sleeve across his eyes to see where he was heading.

The three bandits, knowing he was hard hit, seeing the wobbly, erratic course of the canoe, came bursting out of the flags with eager shouts to finish him off.

Yelling like wolves ganging for a kill, they ran out into ankle-deep water, fifty yards nearer, and opened on him.

A bullet, striking a few feet short, ricocheted off the water and tore through the prow. Providentially it was inches above the wind-water line or it would have sunk the canoe. Another, aimed higher, drilled both sides of the craft, just in front of Alan's knees. A third, striking the wind-water line squarely, tore a jagged big hole in the canvas, struck the barrel of the Browning, shattered part of the ventilator and flounced out under the opposite gunwale.

Alan laid the Browning down flat on the bottom to keep the precious weapon safe; and thrusting his boot against the jagged hole, he tried to stop the spout of water that was rapidly flooding his craft.

In a hazy way he was conscious that the dreaded Savage was not shooting at him. He was still clear enough of mind to realize there must be some reason, some ominous reason, for that. What was staying that murderous gun?—when he had but a hundred yards to the safety of the swan nest. Pausing a second, jerking his head around, he saw the cause. The 'breed had leaped out of covert, like the others; but had raced up along the flags edge and splashed out into knee-deep water. In deadly range, he intended to end the battle with one magazine of cartridges.

A moment after Alan turned to look, the 'breed crouched, steadied his rifle and drew aim. Alan ducked down, the bullet screamed over his neck. It had been aimed at his head. By the fraction of a second he had saved his life. The next bullet struck him, burned through his shirt sleeve, tore a gaping fearful wound through the muscles of his fore-arm, and passed in front of his body, three inches from his heart.

Knowing that the next bullet would surely kill him, Alan flung himself bodily out of the boat to escape that dreaded rifle. Submerging himself, with the craft between him and the 'breed, he clutched the gunwale with his shattered and bleeding hand. Pushing the clumsy craft, he started to swim, in a last goaded effort to reach the safety of the tiny islet.

The canoe was rapidly filling. He felt the smack and tremor of bullets slugging into it. It was water-logged, a dead weight; and he barely could shove it with his one-handed swimming. His heavy sodden clothes seemed to be dragging him down; his strength was swiftly ebbing; the three wounds and their copious bleeding were getting in their work on him.

Fifty yards from the swan nest his feet touched bottom. A dozen yards farther on, in hip-deep water, a spinning slug struck the middle thwart of the canoe squarely and the frail craft caved in. Grabbing the gun and cartridge webs out of it, Alan flashed a glance at the bandits, rose, and dashed for his cover.

Staggering under his heavy burden, with his feet sinking into the quivering muck underfoot, he splashed frantically through the water, throwing all his exhausted strength of body, all his undying strength of heart and will, into those two-score yards. The warm trickle into his eyes blinded him. His little haven of safety became dim—a looming red blur seen through a reddish mist. He was struck in the leg; the shock staggered him, he dropped a web of cartridges; but gripping the others tighter, he lurched on.

Nearly blinded, breathing in hoarse gasps, with his great strength ebbing away, he groped and stumbled through those last few yards to the tiny islet, and collapsed there behind the big swan nest.

For a little time, a minute or two, he lay quiet, breathing heavily, fighting down a nausea of pain. Dimly he heard those rifles still snarling at him and heard the sing-song of their bullets whanging overhead or *plupping* into the mud and dry reeds.

In a vague way he realized that the triumph was his now, if his hands had strength to seize it. If only he could rise up, he could stance the Browning behind this nest and splatter every square inch of the bandits' covert. The gun would be planted on solid earth, not on quivering bog with tripod under water, where muck and broken flags would likely cause a fatal jam. And he would not be shooting at dead-level range, but would have a couple or three feet drop across the water. With the bandits hugging the ground, that elevation would be of tremendous advantage.

As he lay there, nearly helpless, fighting for one last flicker of strength to rise and use the machine gun, he heard Buzzard shouting at him across those seven hundred yards. He could not distinguish the frantic words; he thought Buzzard must be trying to hearten him to one more effort. But then he heard Joyce's voice, crying to him. Closer, vibrant with fear, the warning came to him clearly:

"Alan! Alan! He's coming for you! Alan! Stop him. . . . Shoot him!"

The panic and terror of her voice roused Alan. He understood that some peril was looming upon him from those bandits. With a great effort he rose to an elbow, drunk with pain, giddy from loss of blood. A few seconds later, he crept on elbows and knees to the water edge and laved his face and managed to tie a kerchief around his forehead wound.

The bandage stopped the blood from running down and blinding him. The cold shock of water drove the

nausea away for a little time. Again he heard Joyce crying out to him, but now it was a cry inarticulate, despair-stricken.

He crept back to the swan nest and cautiously raised his head; and he saw the peril that his two friends had tried to rouse him to meet. The huge red-bearded leader had seen him collapse helplessly, and was coming across to put a bullet through his brain and seize the machine gun. Wading out to chin-deep water, the man had swum across the deepest part, had struck shoal; and now, fifty yards away, was splashing in to the tiny islet, a belt-gun in his hand.

Sinking back unseen, Alan drew his heavy automatic, slipped the trigger safety, and waited. As he heard that splashing in the knee-deep shallows, he tensed himself. A few moments later, with his enemy within a dozen paces, he suddenly reared up, up above the shelter, shooting as he rose.

The seven heavy bullets caught the bandit leader in the breast, knocked him over, killed him instantly; and he fell half-sprawled upon the farther edge of the swan nest.

Crouching down again behind that pile of willow sticks and reeds, Alan turned to the Browning. There was a certain grim deliberateness in his manner. He was thinking not so much of the gantlet of death that he himself had just gone through, as of that moment on the *Midnight Sun* when he had bent over the body of his murdered partner, Jimmy Montgomery.

Methodically he spread the tripod and planted it firmly and clicked the Browning into its mount. Very carefully he fed in a web of cartridges till it was caught. Rising to one knee then, clasping the spade grip, he cautiously raised his eyes above his shelter.

The 'breed with the deadly Savage, who had sent

three bullets into his body and had drilled Jimmy Montgomery through the heart, was trying to make it back to the flags. Shouting hoarsely, he kept jerking his head around to see what his enemy was doing. Alan swerved the Browning a few degrees, looked down the sights, and his trigger finger tightened. . . . The 'breed stumbled as that hail of death caught him—stumbled and flung up his arms and pitched face-down in the ankle-deep water.

Releasing for a moment, Alan trained the Browning on that clump of flags where two rifles were still screaming at him; and when he had determined his concentration, the Browning went into play again. Methodically, the gun drumming out its message of death, he swept the clump from end to end, spraying it with bullets, mowing down the flags, splattering the bandits' hiding with a raking, slow-weaving fire.

There in the flags a figure leaped up and blindly tried to escape. Alan swung upon it, the figure vanished, there was a thrashing for a moment among the reeds. To the right a single rifle still held out, shooting at him. He located the spot and poured a storm of bullets into it. . . . With a shrill yell a small wiry man sprang up, flung his gun spasmodically into the air, doubled up limply and sank down in the flags and muck. . . .

Alan stood up then. He thought to swim across and get one of those canoes and go after Joyce. But he had not the strength. The nausea was overpowering him again; his wounds had bled him weak, and the pain of them sickened him. Staggering from the fearful reaction setting in, he sat down on the swan nest, with his world swimming in front of him and all his senses reeling.

A silence had fallen over the marsh and reedy bogs

and sun-glistening waters. A thousand yards distant, a colony of little tern settled slowly back upon their rookery tussocks. Far-away in the northwest a red-throated loon, like a voice of the watery Thal-Azzah, gibbered crazily—a raucous insane laughter beating upon the stillness of death.

CHAPTER XXIV: THE UNKNOWN RIVER

IT WAS four days later that those who waited at Fort Endurance learned what had happened northeast in the Land of Many Waters.

Since Pedneault had vanished in the launch, not a whisper had trickled out of the Thal-Azzah about Baker's aërial patrol against the bandits. But when the news did break, it came with a rush.

One evening at sunset an airplane came swinging around the timbered headland down the Mackenzie. Flying low, just over the water, it veered in toward the steamer landing, touched lightly, skimmed the wavelets, and taxied close in.

As an excited group began gathering at the wharf, the scarlet-and-gold Police launch hove in sight around the headland and bore on toward the post. The two craft manifestly had timed themselves to come in together.

Three Indian canoes darted out to tow the plane in to the landing. Father Claverly had come down the terrace and stood a little apart, quietly watching with observant eyes. Haskell and Williamson had come down; and Elizabeth Spaulding, slipping through the crowd, was trying to edge up near the pier-heads, to be the first to greet Alan Baker.

As the launch drew close, the crowd saw it carried four men. When it nosed alongside, they recognized Pedneault and Bill Hardsock, muddied, unshaven; and Alan Baker, a bandage around his head, his left hand wrapped in surgical dressing, his left arm in a

sling. The fourth man was some outlandish individual of yellowish complexion and almond eyes, with his right arm carefully splinted and bandaged.

The freightage that the launch carried—a machine gun and clutter of rifles, a half dozen bales of peltry worth a small fortune each bale, shovels and corded packs, and five stout leather pouches sewn with rawhide in the prospector fashion—the mere sight of that cargo drew a gasp from the crowd and brought them edging up close.

Joyce had come with Buzzard in the plane. As she unsnapped her safety belt and stood up, she was remembering her last time here at Endurance, when her father was still alive. It seemed a heartless irony of fate that he had died just when his innocence had been proved. Small comfort to know that his name and memory were cleared of guilt. As she thought of him lying dead at Resolution and of the tragic duty calling her there, she was glad that tonight a steamer was coming past and she would leave this North. The sooner and farther she could flee from those haunting memories, the better for her. Perhaps in far-away Ottawa, in a new life, a new work, she would find forgetfulness.

By the time she and Buzzard had skirled ashore, Alan had stepped out upon the planking. He had taken charge of the unloading—ordering the light-fingered Loucheux to keep back, requesting several trappers to help with the cargo, instructing others how to moor the plane. It was good, Joyce thought, to see Alan directing his men again, assuming a leadership that was his by natural right.

In another moment she saw Elizabeth elbow her way through the group pressing around Alan. A gust of emotion—jealousy, scorn, anger—swept across Joyce's

pretty face as she watched Elizabeth's greeting. It was stagey, it was all artificial. Elizabeth's gladness at his return and her sympathy over his wounds were effusive and contemptible. Joyce could not help thinking of herself swimming across to Alan at the swan nest, and of the compassion that tore at her when she found him there, wounded, bleeding, half unconscious. She felt she had known more real sympathy in those moments than Elizabeth would feel in her whole selfish life. A fierce jealousy, a jealous proprietorship, surged through her. Alan had got those wounds fighting for *her;* she had dressed them and taken him to *her* home, and *she* had nursed him through those long hours of feverish pain.

Watching intently, she saw Alan pull himself up formally, a bit coldly, when he faced Elizabeth. He started to reach out his hand, but Elizabeth slipped an arm around his neck and drew him down. As Alan bent and kissed her, Joyce had a flashing memory of those things he'd said about Elizabeth that evening on the shelving rock; and now in his whole bearing she saw with her own eyes that Alan *was* reluctant. Intuitively she knew that he had kissed Elizabeth only because he was too much a man to refuse her pointedly before the eyes of the group.

Haskell came shoving his way out to the wharf edge. Rather obviously to Joyce, it stung him to see Baker directing things, and he intended to assert his authority.

"Hardsock, you and Pedneault are under arrest!"

Bill scarcely glanced up at him. Muddied and haggard from two days of shovel work cutting a channel to refloat the big launch, he and Pedneault continued tossing the pouches and fur bales out upon the planking.

"Did you understand, Hardsock?" Haskell repeated. "You're under arrest."

Bill looked up. "I heard you," he said in weary scorn. "But haven't time to be arrested just now. Put it off a few minutes, can't you? Here's a hundred and fifty thousand in furs and gold that'd better get under lock and key before part of it walks off. And a prisoner to take up. Ped, Alan said don't get Joyce's peltry mixed up with the stolen bales."

Williamson came down to the wharf edge. Joyce saw him hesitate a moment, then hold out his hand to Alan. It was only a momentary pause, but she saw it distinctly, and understood the reason; and it roused a hot anger in her.

She was proud of Alan for the way he reacted. He too had noticed the hesitation, and he remarked curtly, refusing his hand:

"Don't bother, superintendent. You might lose caste. I've heard I'm a criminal."

Joyce expected the division commander to make some stern retort. But he did not. Instead, he was visibly hurt by Alan's words. His eyes were taking in the recovered loot, the tired men, Alan's wounds.

Presently he asked gently: "How badly are you shot up, Baker?"

"Nothing much—except a finger gone."

"I see you won out against those men. This prisoner, I suppose, is one of them. Where are the others?"

"Over in the Thal-Azzah. We did take the trouble to give them a decent burial."

"Dead?"

"Yes, dead. It was a fair fight, if you care to take my word for it."

Williamson was silent a few moments. Into his eyes came a far-away expression, as though he was thinking

of renowned patrols in the history of the Force and realizing that Baker's victory over these six criminals was one of them and one of the best of them. Finally he requested: "Won't you come up to the cabin, Baker? I'd like to hear your report on this."

"I'll come up." Alan sent an ominous glance at Haskell. "I've got several things to say to you, superintendent."

Joyce felt someone touching her arm. Turning, she saw it was Father Claverly.

As he shook hands he asked her, "Joyce, if you have time tonight, step over to my study and visit me, won't you?"

His glance went to her black arm-band, the only token of mourning she'd been able to find; and Joyce felt he wanted to comfort her about her father and talk about her plans, now when she was alone and going into a new life.

"Why yes, Father Claverly, if you wish. I'd better come before ten; the steamer may be here any time after that. We passed it about seventy miles down."

"You're leaving tonight?"

"Yes. There'll be no other for two weeks. Bill told you I'm going back to Ottawa?"

Father Claverly nodded, and a little afterwards he left her.

Alan turned away from Williamson, joined her and Buzzard; and the three of them started up the terrace together.

At Mrs. Drummond's house, Alan stopped. "Joyce, I'll leave Buzzard to you now. What time he's here Mrs. Drummond will be glad to have him."

Buzzard held out his hand. "Good luck over there, son, with this bird Haskell. Make hash out of him. Give him the works. If you need any physical help . . .

You're under the weather yourself . . . I could kick him clear down the slope into the river for trying to shoot us there on En Traverse."

Joyce was deadly serious in her last words to Alan.

"You'll not forget what we talked over—the Inconnu trap?"

"I'll not forget. But he may not walk into it, Joyce. He's shrewd, he's careful."

"You can be shrewder, Alan! You can *make* him walk into it. Let him think he's got you beaten and hopeless. Hide what you feel. And don't antagonize Superintendent Williamson. You almost did, down there at the wharf. I was proud of you for that, Alan, but you're *too* blunt—and honest."

"I'll try to be more tactful."

She held his hand a moment in her warm clasp, thinking of her father lying dead at Resolution, of Alan's noble struggle to save him, of Haskell breaking her father's will to live. It was some solace to know she had helped Alan plan a trap for the guilty inspector, a deadly trap if Haskell only walked into it.

As she quietly wished him good luck, in her heart she was fervently saying to him, "God go with you, Alan." And because she had passionately resolved not to see him again before she left, she meant her words not only for the stormy hour ahead of him, but for all the years of his life.

Alan strode into the cabin in a savage fighting mood. He had risen from a sick-bed to come to Endurance before Williamson left, and he had sworn he was going to crush Haskell. The inspector had forced him out of the Mounted; had caused Larry to be crippled for life; had refused protection to Joyce in her desperate need; had made a scapegoat of Dave MacMillan to save his

face; and more than anyone on earth he was responsible for that sorry tragedy at Resolution.

From those moments down on the wharf, he knew that Williamson was prejudiced against him. His own act in signing that statement of responsibility and buying out had damned him with the old officer; and Bill's desertion and Pedneault's lie made his prospects still darker.

Almost the only hope he had was that trap which he and Joyce had planned—an idea born in Joyce's quick brain and developed between them during the three days she had nursed him.

When he went in, he found Williamson and Haskell sitting at the desk, waiting. Haskell did not move; but Williamson, considerate of his wounds, drew up a chair and invited him to sit down.

"Won't you give us the story of your patrol, Baker?" he requested kindly.

Alan countered: "My story doesn't begin with this patrol. It begins last fall, when this gentleman here came down north. I want to tell it clean, from then till now."

"That's your right," Williamson assented.

Alan hoped that his story, by the sheer blunt truth of it, would carry conviction. But as he swept down across the last nine months, that hope speedily flickered out. Plainly Williamson doubted him. He could fairly see Williamson making reservations to everything he said.

When he finished, the old officer did not comment. The silence was foreboding. Almost in desperation, Alan took up a couple matters that lay very near his heart. He felt that he must speak of them now, while the superintendent was still mindful of his patrol and his men's valiant fight.

"There's two or three favors I want to ask of you, sir. Since they're not in my own behalf, you may agree to them. One is about Chink Woolley, the man we brought in. I want to put in a word for him. He deserves heavy punishment but he shouldn't be hanged. He gave us some priceless information. We might never have saved Joyce MacMillan if he hadn't. He was the nearest approach to a man in that pack. Those other men intended to kill him. He knew it; but at first he tried to shield them. I can't forget that. If it's impossible for me to be present at his trial, I want to turn over to you an affidavit in his behalf."

"I'll attend to it," Williamson agreed. "Your word should have weight; you were the storm-center of this trouble. The man did help save Miss MacMillan, and that should keep him from hanging."

"Then, about Featherof, my partner in this patrol. He stole some government property and broke some flying regulations. But he made the whole thing possible, he threw in with me without a thought of pay, he risked his life half a dozen times. We're in position to restore that property or else pay for it in full. Will you get Featherof out of this jam?"

"How about yourself, Baker?"

"Well, I don't want to be jailed, if I can help it. But I suppose your favors will stretch just so far. I was the instigator, and if anybody has to pay, I'm the one."

Williamson was thoughtful. Few times in his career had he ever allowed motive, however worthy, to be excuse for breaking the law. But as he glanced at Baker, wounded, maimed in one hand, still pale from loss of blood, he thought what a heartless travesty of justice it would be if Baker were imprisoned. Whatever the truth of his trouble with Haskell, the great fact remained that he had gone on a thankless and

prodigious patrol and had run those criminals to earth.

"I'll do what I can for you both," he promised, with no reluctance. "When I go back outside I'll talk to the Edmonton officials and try to get those charges *nol-prossed*. But you and Featherof see to restoring that property."

Alan promised: "We won't fail you on that. It's mighty fine and square of you." After a moment, he went on: "Considering all you've agreed to, I hate to ask still another favor. But I've got to. I've got to speak up for Hardsock and Pedneault. They have charges against them, serious and true charges. But there's this to be said, sir. The gas and oil Bill stole was what kept us flying. Bill stayed alone there on the island, guarding the loot, willing to fight it out with five men. Pedneault came with the launch and strengthened our hand when everything looked black, and that launch brought back a hundred and fifty thousand dollars in stolen furs and gold.

"Neither man deserted. They both intended to return here the moment our patrol ended. They rendered a tremendous service to the Force. They were true to duty in the highest sense of the word. Ought men to be punished, after what they went through and what they accomplished? Are you going to look at the good they did, or at nothing but the bad?"

Williamson did not answer. He could not agree to dismissing these grave charges, yet he felt the human justice of Alan's appeal. It seemed to him that the matter went deeper than a question of insubordination. Those men had been under Baker's sway, and he knew what a powerful influence Baker had over his men. They had only been loyal to their leader. If there was any blame, it rested with Baker, because he had connived with them and used his strong sway over them.

Thinking deeply, he gazed through the window, down upon the dark river. In this tangled affair, it was a sore task to judge wisely, to do the right thing. Baker's long patrol, his indomitable courage in going after these men, his relentless drive in hammering his daring plan through to success, his final battle at the swan nest—the whole thing was a splendid feat. In his forty years the old officer had never seen a more magnificent piece of work. It was like Baker, like the brilliant sergeant whom he once had trusted and fought for.

But the rest of that story, his trouble with Haskell —Williamson did not accept that as true. From start to finish Baker's account was an utter conflict with Haskell's; and to the stern old officer, judging with impartial mind, Haskell's story seemed more credible. The inspector had praised Baker warmly, but Baker had just now said some harsh things about Haskell. Quite plainly Baker harbored a personal hostility which probably had warped and twisted his story out of all semblance to the truth.

One thing Williamson did know beyond any doubting: Baker's account clashed with Haskell's all along the line. One of these two men was an out-and-out liar.

So far merely listening, Haskell was fairly writhing with thwarted anger and the bitterest chagrin. In the one thing that mattered, Baker had triumphed over him again; he had been let off scot-free from those charges . . . free to take Elizabeth away, free for their marriage in Edmonton and that honeymoon in the Blackfoot Selkirks.

In the tightening silence, waiting for Williamson to start probing, Haskell looked out along the terrace and saw a thing which struck him with chill premonition.

The doorway of the mission hospital opened; Pedneault and Bill Hardsock came out, bringing Larry Younge with them. Bill on one side, Pedneault on the other, half-leading, half-carrying their crippled partner, they were making straight for the cabin.

In their slow measured tread there was something that alarmed Haskell; something that seemed grim and purposive and foreboding. They were hard men, northern men. . . .

When they trod into the cabin and Williamson heard them, he turned, frowning, and demanded:

"What do you men want?"

"Sir, we came here to put our paddle in," Bill stated bluntly. "We knew you were thrashing out this trouble between Alan and the inspector——"

"Your counsel wasn't asked. This matter is between Baker and Inspector Haskell."

"Bill, don't try to run a buck," Alan interposed, fearful that this unexpected move of his three men might kill any chance to trap Haskell. "If the superintendent doesn't want you here, obey him and go."

Bill stubbornly refused. He said to Williamson: "You've got a name, sir, for giving every buck cop and non-com in your division a square cut and seeing all sides of an argument. I don't think you'll kick us out without hearing what we've got to say. This is as much our fight as Alan's. We've had to pay, too, for the inspector's acts. Here's one of us crippled for life because the inspector hog-tied us on that patrol with some damn-fool orders. After a thing like that, do we have to shut up and take it and not even be allowed to——?"

"Sit down!" Williamson bade them. "I'm going to get to the bottom of this. When your time comes I'll hear what you've got to say. Now Baker, I want you

to answer some questions. What made you split your detail on that first patrol?"

Alan remembered Joyce's last words to him, "Let Haskell think you're beaten and hopeless." It went against his whole nature to play a part, especially so weak a part; but he forced himself to it. He said in hesitant voice:

"Haskell ordered me to, sir. He ordered me to follow both branches. When I objected, he threatened to bust me and keep me here at the post."

"That's a lie!" Haskell challenged. "I allowed him to do as he thought best. He purposely made a failure of that patrol. I don't ask you to take my word. Corporal Whipple was here in the cabin, and heard our talk. And Baker, over his signed statement, admitted to responsibility."

"What proof have you got, Baker?" Williamson demanded.

Alan kept silent, deliberately allowing his silence to damn him. Williamson's probe was leading in the right direction, leading toward that deadly trap. Haskell must be made to believe he was winning, or he might draw back.

To Alan's consternation Bill Hardsock burst out: "Proof? Hell's blue blazes! Alan was half-sick, all the way up the Alooska, because of them orders. He felt he was being forced to take us men into a terrible danger. We all knew it was crazy to split up——"

Williamson silenced him. "You're merely making an assertion, corporal. You have no proof. Baker, do you admit responsibility for that patrol?"

Alan shook his head. "No, I—I don't," he stammered.

Haskell smiled. He had Baker on the run.

Bill's chair came down with a crash. "No, he don't admit responsibility! Alan, for Lord's sake, deny it! Say something!"

Williamson reminded: "Baker, you signed a statement of responsibility. Whipple was a witness."

"Whipple got a corporalcy for swearing to that lie!" Bill defended hotly. "Ped and Larry and me, we were down at the wharf throwing things together."

"Bill, shut up!" Alan pleaded. "Sir, that statement . . . When we came back—yes, I signed it. But I—I had to."

"You had to?"

"Yes, to get out of the Mounted. He wouldn't let me buy out unless I did sign."

"Why under heaven did you want to buy out all that fast and furious?"

"I wanted to be free," Alan led on, step by cautious step. "I wanted to go after those men."

"Baker, look here," Williamson said sternly. "You infer you wanted to go after those men so badly that you were willing to buy out, cut off your record and sign a lie. Why then wouldn't you coöperate with Haskell to get them?"

"Well, sir, he—he wouldn't coöperate."

"I can't believe that. He tried to help you even afterwards—after you bought out and were on a private venture."

"When was that?" Alan queried.

"At En Traverse Lake."

"So he was trying to help us. I didn't—ah—have that impression at the time, sir."

"He even shot signals for you to wait."

Bill Hardsock swore luridly. "Of all the fork-tongued lies, that's the beat of 'em all!"

Alan allowed the lie to go unchallenged. If Haskell got by with that one, he would be bold and unwary.

"But sir," he led on, "when I came back from the Alooska patrol, he wouldn't coöperate with me then. He didn't seem much interested, I don't think, in getting those bandits."

"Not much interested?" Haskell echoed, with a great show of astonishment. "Sir, I wanted him to make a patrol to the Inconnu River. But he was in a temper. He wouldn't even listen to my suggestion."

A wild elation surged through Alan. One more step and Haskell was doomed! He fought down his elation and fidgeted uneasily in his chair.

Williamson bore down on him hard. "Baker, answer that charge! Haskell suggested a patrol to the Inconnu. In my opinion that was a splendid suggestion. It was almost the only hope of capturing those criminals. You wouldn't listen to him. How then can you assert you were forced to buy out?"

"He didn't. . . . It wasn't him that made that suggestion," Alan stammered weakly. "I think—I believe I made that suggestion myself. But he wouldn't let me go."

"That's a lie!" Haskell pounced upon him. "*I* suggested it. I begged him to make that patrol."

"How about that, Baker?" Williamson demanded. "He says *he* suggested it. But you say *you* did. Have you got any proof?"

Alan looked at Haskell. "You suggested that Inconnu patrol? It was your idea?"

Haskell nodded. "I did. Whipple can witness it." He was smiling openly in triumph.

All Alan's hesitation dropped away from him. There was no longer need to dissimulate. It had been hard for him to appear beaten, afraid of his enemy; and to

defend himself so weakly against those lies. But it was over now.

He turned to Williamson. "You heard him. You heard what he said. He told you he suggested that Inconnu trip. He just repeated it and he said Whipple was witness. Don't let him back out of it now."

"I don't have to back out of anything," Haskell snapped. He was staring in sudden uneasiness at Baker. His smile vanished; he sat tensed, waiting, with a nameless fear whispering to him.

"Yes, I heard him," Williamson answered. "What about it?"

Alan rose slowly to his feet, pulling himself up to his full lanky and powerful height. In that moment when he realized Haskell was caught in the deadly trap, his mind whipped back to Joyce's home on the Alooska, to Joyce's room where he had lain through weary hours of doubt and pain, and where he and she had carefully plotted this trap. He felt a wordless tender gratitude to Joyce; this stratagem was hers more than his; her quick brain had been the first to see its crushing possibilities.

The eyes of the other men were upon him as he rose up. His pale face, the bandage around his head, gave him a strange awesome appearance. The cabin hushed, so that his heavy blow fell upon a silence.

"Inspector, you say you asked me to lead that Inconnu detail. You say *you* suggested it. You say it occurred to *you* that the bandits would escape by that river. *I say you are a liar!* I propose to prove you're a liar."

He paused a moment, then raised his right hand and pointed at the wall chart behind Haskell's desk.

"The Inconnu River is not shown on that map of yours, inspector. You tried to find out from Hardsock,

from Younge, from that Indian, Little Otter, where the river is. You didn't know. You don't know now. How could you suggest sending a patrol to a river when you haven't got the slightest knowledge of its location? Step up there to that chart, you, and show us the Inconnu!"

His words fell like a bombshell. For a stunned moment there was silence. Williamson's astonished eyes turned upon the inspector, in sharp question, demanding answer.

Haskell sprang to his feet, snarling at Alan. "I don't take orders from you!" He was fighting like a trapped wolf. His panic, his livid face, betrayed him.

"Then consider it an order from *me!*" the old officer commanded. "Show *me* where the Inconnu is!"

Haskell did not stir. His impregnable defense had crumbled in one spot; the sea was rushing in upon him. . . .

He heard Williamson thundering: "I say, answer Baker's question! How could you suggest a patrol to a river that you know nothing about?"

Haskell did not answer. Caught, trapped. . . . He had gone too far, he had overplayed. . . . He heard Larry Younge's savage mocking laugh; heard Bill Hardsock chuckling, "Tried to steal Alan's thunder, and got struck by 't!" . . . The room seemed to be swaying. . . . Williamson's angry erect figure became a blur. . . . Across the desk he saw Alan Baker's face in a sort of haze, not smiling at him, not mocking, but hard, pitiless. . . . The man had beaten him, had taken away the girl he loved—this man whom he hated so fiercely that once he had tried to kill him.

Out of the haze he heard Baker's voice, "Liar! Smoother!" . . . Something snapped within, and his last vestige of self-control was swept away. A mad-

dened anger shook him, blinded him. In a fury he suddenly drew back and swung and smashed a fist against that hated face, as though trying to blot it out.

The blow unsteadied Baker for a moment. He stepped back. Williamson tried to interpose. Bill sprang up and leaped across the room to jump between them. But Haskell had swung again. Alan flung up his left arm to protect himself. A grimace of pain jigged across his face as the blow fell upon his wound. He did not step away that time. . . . For an instant his eyes measured distance. . . . His right arm went back, swung, and his hard fist caught Haskell under the jaw, a single smashing blow that dazed him and sent him reeling against the wall.

When Bill and Pedneault helped Haskell to his chair and he sat down, groggy and white of face, Williamson bade the two:

"Take Constable Younge and get out. Baker, stay here; I want you here."

Vaguely Haskell realized that the superintendent was ordering the men away so that they might not witness the humiliation of an officer. He had lost. The avalanche had crashed down upon him. Baker had come triumphant through this hour.

But in those moments of his crushing defeat, while Williamson was trying to fire the men out of the cabin, Haskell felt the first small breath of a strange relief, like a cool wind across his face. His fight with these men, these northern men, had been long and weary; but he was free of it now. He had become involved in lies; had been sucked deeper and deeper into a morass of falsehoods and perfidy. He was free of all that now. In these last weeks there had been times—when he looked upon Larry Younge, when he thought of Baker's great-hearted adventure, when the news came

of Dave MacMillan's suicide—that his conscience had revolted and he had loathed himself. He felt as though by making a clean breast of everything to Williamson, he would be coming out of a dark and noisome place into the sunshine again.

Only the old aching madness toward Elizabeth Spaulding would not down, but rose to torture him.

He heard Bill Hardsock still arguing stoutly, as Williamson backed the three men toward the door. Disjointed phrases impinged upon him . . . "Alan had to get out of the Mounted, sir, to go after those bandits. It's a hell of a pass, sir, when a man has to *get out of service to get his men!* It'll be worse yet if something ain't done about it somehow."

"I'll see to Baker's case. I say, get out!"

And he slammed the door behind them.

CHAPTER XXV : BY THE LIGHTNING FLASH

At Alan's cabin late that evening, Bill was sitting on the edge of the cot, head in hands, plunged into dejected thoughts. He was in such a blue funk that he neither heard nor cared what Alan and Buzzard were talking about.

Looking up now and then, Bill would glance through the open doorway into the storm-lowering night. At any moment he expected to see the lights of the L. & H. steamer which would take Joyce away within the hour. Not to return here, after her tragic duty at Resolution, but to go outside to Edmonton and on to Ottawa, twenty-five hundred miles away. He would never visit her again, would never again see her running down the path to greet him, never feel he was helping her or doing her some little service.

Back in the western hills a thunderstorm was rapidly sweeping eastward into the great valley of the Mackenzie. Down the dark slope a candle gleamed in Father Claverly's study, where Joyce had gone. Pedneault had helped Larry hobble down to the river bank; fishing from a rock jut, they were talking, smoking, tossing their catch to a circle of expectant Police huskies. By the occasional flashes of lightning Bill saw Whipple near the flower-garden edge, sitting alone, a forlorn and dismal figure, brooding on what awaited him here at Endurance among these men whom he had lied about and spied on.

An hour ago, by sheer accident, Bill had discovered

that he himself was now officially in charge here at Endurance. Walking past Haskell's cabin in the twilight, he had caught a few angry sentences from Williamson:

"If I had the entire say-so, Haskell, you'd go out of the Mounted faster than you came in. You're suspended; Hardsock will be given command here till I see what Baker is going to do. You don't deserve a chance to walk straight, but I'll give you one rather than kick up a row over you. There's a rook detachment down on the Border that's about your fit. I'm going to transfer you there, and I'll try not to laugh when I see men saluting you."

To be in command of the detachment was small solace to Bill. It simply meant more work, more responsibility, without Alan's judgment and leadership to lean on.

In the shaft of light streaming from the cabin door a girl's figure appeared. Bill straightened up suddenly, recognizing Elizabeth. As she came to the threshold where the light was full upon her, one glance told him she was imperially angry.

Always a bit afraid of the supercilious girl, Bill had no desire to linger and find out her trouble. Nudging Buzzard, he whispered:

"She wants to talk with Alan. We'd better get out. She's got a rolling-pin look in her eyes."

When his two partners left, it seemed to Alan that the warm friendly atmosphere of the cabin vanished with them and the place became chill and uncomfortable. He resented Elizabeth's coming at this hour, just when he wanted to go down and be with Joyce a little time before she left.

As Elizabeth came across to the library nook in the full candle glow, he too saw she was angry, and in-

stantly he guessed the cause of it. She had heard . . . She was going to fling reproaches at him, perhaps throw an ultimatum into his face.

The thought hardened Alan against her. For once, as he watched the glow in her auburn hair, he did not think of her as sister to the man who had been closer to him than Bill or Buzzard had been or could ever be. Now, in these momentous few minutes, when his mere "I will" or "I will not" was going to change the whole course of his life, he was secretly praying that Elizabeth would give him excuse to break the engagement.

With no word about his long patrol or the wounds he had brought away from it, Elizabeth demanded:

"Is it true—what I've heard—about that reward money? You're not going to accept any of it?"

Alan was shocked that in her first breath she should speak of money. He said rather tersely:

"That's not altogether true. I'm taking enough to buy the MacMillan Trading Post for Larry; and I have to pay for those things Buzzard and I stole in Edmonton. But I'm not keeping any of it otherwise."

"Are you crazy—to throw away more than you've made in all the years you've been stationed here in this backwoods?"

Alan reddened. "I'm neither crazy nor eaten up with sentiment. I'm—I'm . . . Elizabeth, look here. On that patrol I killed men, I took human life. They deserved to die, but I'm not accepting money for killing them. It'd be blood money. It'd be turning a justifiable act into something horrible."

"Then why did you go on that patrol and waste all these weeks?"

"Good Lord, have you been thinking I did it for the money? Is money the only thing in the world you ever think about?" He tried to curb his anger and speak

quietly. "Elizabeth, your brother Curt went on a patrol, he gave his very life, because—because . . . *You* may not understand why, but God knows it wasn't for money."

"Then you intend to throw away ten thousand dollars?"

"If you want to put it like that, yes. I couldn't associate with myself if I'd accept one red cent of it."

In silence they looked at one another, Elizabeth angry and accusing, Alan firm, unyielding. After a moment, realizing she had run up against granite in Alan Baker on this question, she turned to another.

"There's something else I want an understanding about. Mrs. Drummond told me you intend to take care of Jim Montgomery's girl."

"Yes, that's true. If I don't, who will?"

"It doesn't matter who will! She'll be taken care of some way. But I'm not going to have an orphanage in *my* home."

"No, and I don't think there'll ever be a nursery in *your* home, Elizabeth."

"But what makes you feel you're responsible? Why on earth . . . Just because you were acquainted with that child's father——"

Alan sharply interrupted her. "Elizabeth, let me point out something to you. It may be cruel and ungenerous of me, but it's got to be said. When Curt was taken, it fell to me to look out for you. You were a grown woman; you had chances of employment; you had other advantages. But I assumed responsibility. Please, now, I'm not throwing it up to you; I did it freely and would've done more if I'd been able.

"Now Jimmy was killed. I wasn't just an 'acquaintance' of his; I was the nearest person in the world to him. He came from England; he had no relatives.

That little tot of his . . . Elizabeth, it's but four years old, it's helpless here in the North, it's dependent in a terrible sense. Easy to say it'll be taken care of some way, but someone's got to do that.

"The point is, Elizabeth, if I had a duty to Curt, I had one to Jimmy, too. You didn't object at all to my being responsible for *you;* you accepted it as more or less your due. But now you say I'm not responsible for Jimmy's child. I don't follow your reasoning. If you don't want to take Jimmy's child into our home, that's your right, I guess. But I feel responsible, damned responsible! I'll pay for the child to be taken care of elsewhere, and the job done properly!"

She flung at him: "Then I'm to have no rights in my home, and nothing to say about how our money will be spent?"

Alan commented: "You always were good at wording a thing so it puts the other person in the wrong." As he looked at her, so angry, so exigent with him, Alan remembered her last visit here in his cabin, when she had offered herself to him—because he was going to a good-salaried position.

With more harshness than he had ever shown her, he said sharply: "I'm going to look out for Jimmy's child. That's settled. If you don't like it, you don't have to, you know."

Elizabeth drew back, startled and shocked. Alan's tones were like a slap of cold water to her anger. The hint lurking behind "You don't have to" let her know that her hold on him was slender and might snap if she antagonized him.

All evening she had been very thoughtful. Down at the landing when she greeted him, she had sensed some profound change in his manner. With every moment of their talk now it became clearer and more ominous.

His coldness frightened her. It destroyed all her former assurance that she dominated him. She sensed he wanted to end their engagement and would do it here and now if she gave him sufficient cause. A whisper warned her:

"Be careful, careful. Don't break with him, unless —until . . ."

Entirely mistress of herself, she was able to say to him presently, with even a touch of repentance in her tones:

"You may be right about that reward money and Jimmy's little tot. I didn't see your viewpoint, when I first came in here. I won't try to persuade you to do something you feel is wrong."

Watching him intently, she saw he was surprised, and deeply disappointed, at her yielding to him. He *wanted* to break with her! He *wanted* her to release him!

A little fearfully she broached the main purpose of her coming here.

"I heard you're going back into the Mounted."

"Who told you that?"

She started to say that Haskell had met her half an hour ago on the slope and insisted on speaking to her, and had told her of it. But wisely she checked herself.

"I just heard. Several people said so."

"They were a bit hasty."

"Then you're not going back?"

He answered her indirectly. "Williamson offered to stop my buying-out papers at division headquarters or else reënlist me as a constable and promote me to sergeant again. He said he'd write himself to Colonel Steele and explain, and ask Steele to release me, if I'd agree to come back into service."

In her heart Elizabeth was flinging at him, contemptuously: "If you go back into that ninety-a-month rut, I'll never marry you! I'll never live here in this backwoods and be shunted from barracks to barracks!" But her lips said to him, with admirable self-control: "You haven't decided? You want time to think it over?"

"Yes, time——"

She saw him studying her, wondering, all confused and uncertain. She knew he had expected her to oppose him, to demand that he stay out of the Mounted. And she knew, too, that such an ultimatum would mean a quick and abrupt end to their engagement. For her it might be like walking off a cliff.

"You want me to go down to Victoria?" he demanded sharply.

Elizabeth was entirely too wise to deny that. "Yes, I do, Alan. I *would* rather we lived there. But you want to stay here, and I don't feel it's my right to dictate your life work."

"You're willing to stay here, then?"

"I'm willing to let you decide. I'm willing to stay here, if you want to."

Even while she spoke, she was wondering. . . . Why had Haskell come to her tonight with the news about Alan? She dared not forget his references last fall to his year in Paris; but she could still vividly remember him, two weeks ago, coming to her in the twilight, desperate for her company, begging for a few minutes with her. Against his former "affairs" and his untrustworthy nature, she weighed his passionate infatuation. The scales hung in the balance, uncertain, precarious. He would promise marriage; but once she was out in Edmonton or the big eastern cities, once she had broken with Alan and put herself in Haskell's

power, how could she be sure he would carry out his promise?

If she could talk with him, perhaps he would commit himself. Perhaps she could lead him into some arrangement safe for her. . . .

She temporized: "I'm sorry I was so—so sharp about those other things, Alan. I'm dreadfully tired and worn-out. This last week, not knowing where you were or if you were in danger—it was a nightmare. I think I'll go, if you'll excuse me. We can talk about this tomorrow, Alan, can't we?"

"Yes, tomorrow," he said dully. "We can talk about it then."

When she left the cabin and started down the terrace, a lightning flash revealed to her Constable Whipple still sitting forlorn and dismal at the edge of Mrs. Drummond's flower garden. By the window of his tiny study Father Claverly sat alone. Joyce had gone. There was a light in Inspector Haskell's cabin; he must still be awake. . . .

A few miles down river she heard the distant, long-drawn toot of the fur-trading steamer beating up to Endurance and on south to Resolution. The sound awoke a tumult of memories; it seemed like a voice of the outside, an echo of the civilization that all her being clamored for. She glanced again at Haskell's cabin. He was going south, south to the land of cities. It would be like a flight, an escape from this far North country, into the haven of that Ontario estate, his comfortable heritage, their winters in glittering Ottawa.

She thought of going over to his cabin on some pretext. But after her coldness of these last weeks, such an act would be too much an overture, even though she had talked with him this evening. Why couldn't she

send Whipple with some hint, some message to him? Haskell would surely come out to her. . . .

In dull uncaring mood, Alan had flung himself down on the bed for a few moments. Elizabeth had not hinted at releasing him; she had given him no honest cause to break the engagement himself, but had yielded to him on every point. He felt that tomorrow, after Joyce had gone away, he would not greatly care whether she released him or not.

His arm wound throbbed painfully where Haskell had struck him. The long day had been a physical and emotional strain. Hardly aware of the pain, he was fighting for strength and courage to go down and tell Joyce good-bye. He too had heard the whistle of the steamer that was taking her out of the North.

A timid knock at the door roused him. With a leaping hope that it might be Joyce, he got up hastily, stepped into the outer room and bade "Come in."

His visitor was Corporal Whipple.

With a hasty glance at the door, as though fearful of being overheard, the corporal said secretively:

"I came to tell you . . . There's something I think you ought to know, sir. It's for your own good."

Alan studied the man scornfully a moment or two. He made a shrewd guess:

"I suppose you want to blab something about Haskell. Your ship is scuttled, so you're trying to get aboard another one."

"It's about Haskell, yes, sir."

"Don't 'sir' me. And I don't want to hear anything you can possibly say. You'd lie about him just as quick as you did about me. Get out!"

Whipple pleaded: "But I think you'd want to hear

this, Sergeant Baker. You really ought to know. It's my duty to tell you."

"What's your game, fellow? What're you expecting to get out of double-crossing Haskell and playing up to me? Come out plain."

"I—I . . . Well, the superintendent says he's going to make me stay here at Endurance. He says it would be—well, punishment, because I told—I said what the inspector ordered me to say about that patrol. I'd like —I thought you might help me. . . . If I could only get transferred to some other post . . ."

"That's a wise ambition of yours," Alan commented. "Damned wise!—after the way you've lied and spied on us men. And you thought I'd help you get a transfer! While I'm thinking about it—if *I* go back in service here, you'd better yank those two-stripes off in a hurry. It takes a *man* to wear that uniform down here and a hell of a good man to wear those stripes on his arm. Now get out!" He turned away.

Goaded by the fearsome prospect of living here among these men, Whipple made a last frantic effort.

"You've got to know about this, Sergeant Baker. I think it's shameful the way she's deceiving you and the way he's meeting her—out there, at night——"

Alan whirled on him. "She—deceiving me . . ." In his astonishment he forgot his scornful contempt of this sycophant. The words struck him like a physical blow.

"I knew you never suspected a thing, sergeant. I felt it was my duty to let you know. I mean Miss Spaulding. She's meeting him, she's down there at the edge of the woods; she sent me to tell him where he could find her, and he went to her. He's there with her now."

He backed away from Alan hastily. The expression that came over Alan's face let him know he was fum-

bling with dynamite, and God pity him if he bungled it.

"D'you mean," Alan demanded, "that she's down there at the woods with Haskell? She sent you to bring him out there to her?"

"Yes sir," Whipple stammered. "I'm telling you the truth, sir." He grew a little more assured as he realized that Baker's towering anger did not include him. Baker's anger went past him as though he were too inconsequential even to notice, and he thanked heaven for that. "They're out there now, Sergeant Baker. He's trying to get her to—well, to throw you over and go with him, but she's afraid he mightn't marry her and then she'd be—well, stranded if she throws you over."

A horrible suspicion shot into Alan's mind. Here in his cabin a quarter-hour ago, why had Elizabeth come in so angry and imperious, and then done a sudden about-face and so strangely yielded to him? Had she been weighing her chances with Haskell, thinking of marrying Haskell, even while she had talked of "our" home?

As he realized that Whipple was telling the truth, that she was with Haskell there at the woods edge now, his suspicion mounted to a certainty. With him, with Haskell too, Elizabeth was playing a game, a game so despicable and sordid that he had not thought any girl capable of it. If she could get Haskell, she would break her engagement in an instant. But she wanted to be sure of a marriage before she took that step. She'd made a mockery of affection, she'd lived in the depths of treacherous dishonesty, and now she was selling herself in the best and surest market. It was appalling.

A thought burned through Alan like living flame: "Good God, it was for her, a mercenary like her, that

I broke away from Joyce! I let her lead me, use me. It was for her I kept that promise sacred——"

Whipple pleaded timidly, as Alan started past him for the door: "About my transfer, sir—you'll help me? You'll do what you can for me, sir?"

Alan's answer fairly dazed him. "I'll get you a transfer! Before Williamson leaves! And still be in your debt!"

As he strode down the slope toward the woods where Whipple had said he would find them, it seemed to Alan that a heavy weight which he had borne this past year, which had drained his energy and caused him to flounder around in bewildered uncertainty, had suddenly fallen away from him.

Ahead of him at the timber edge he made out the dim whiteness of Elizabeth's dress; and then by a lightning flash he saw her and Haskell sitting together under a low sweeping pine. He had an instant's glimpse of Haskell holding her hands, pleading with her. Of Elizabeth listening, uncertain of his passion, coolly drawing him on to a commitment.

Alan wondered how Haskell could be so blind a fool. How the man's pride could let him take up with a girl so patently turning to him from another man.

He could have crept up unobserved and listened, but he scorned to do that. Of Elizabeth's treachery he no longer harbored doubt. That was all he wanted to know.

When he loomed upon them out of the gusty darkness, they sprang to their feet, Elizabeth panic-stricken, Haskell with a snarl of anger.

"Put up the gun, Haskell!" Alan bade him, noticing the quick blurred movement. "I don't want to fight you. Not for *her!* I didn't come for that!"

He stepped on up till he was face to face with them

there in the darkness. A long thundercrash that split into jarring thunder and rolled bellowing across the great river, lit up the terrace and the dark woods. By the light of it he saw Elizabeth's features, white and scared. She knew he had found her out, knew she no longer had any hold on him; and she, who had so long dominated him with her angers and moods and the power that circumstances had given her over him, now shrunk back from his flaming scorn. She was trembling with panic and Alan knew why. What if Haskell too should throw her over? What if Haskell failed her now?

A host of bitter and pitiless words had been surging through Alan's brain as he had come down the slope. He wanted to taunt her, not for having made herself dependent on him, but for taking his money while she harbored treachery in her heart. He wanted to tell her that it was not affection for her which had led him to turn away from Joyce and enter into that reluctant engagement. He swore to fling her sordidness into her face so that she would know he realized it now to its depths. He intended to remind her of that night in his cabin when she had offered herself to him out of motives akin to those of any paid woman.

But as he confronted the two of them, Alan checked the brutal words. Haskell had moved a little in front of Elizabeth. There was something of protection, of sheltering, in that act; something which came nearer making Alan respect the man than any act he had ever seen from Haskell. He knew that those words of his, if Haskell took up with her, would linger with the man and destroy his respect for her and would sometime cause the worst of bitterness between them.

He did not speak to Elizabeth at all, but ignored her.

"Don't think I came down here to interfere, Haskell," he said, in harsh cold voice. *"You're welcome.* And don't think you surprised me tonight. I haven't been blind. You sent me away on those crazy patrols so you could be alone with her. You went sneaking around to her while I was keeping her and she was engaged to me. You busted me, loaded me with the shame and blame of that Alooska misery, because you thought it'd swing her to you. But she was playing too safe to break with me. She didn't trust you. I can't blame her for that. Not after the way she saw you deal with me, and after your tall talk about mistresses in the European capitals——"

Haskell drew his fist back in hot anger. "Don't bring that up! Don't mention her name in that connection."

"I'm glad you feel that way. You'd better feel that way. You're not in Paris or Madrid now, where you can take a train and fade. You're here in the north woods, a thousand miles from a train. Here a man stands up to what he says."

He paused a moment; he leaned a little nearer Haskell; he delivered his ultimatum in the tones of a grim warning:

"You've worked hard enough to get her. You fought me with lies and did me all the damage a man could do. What happened between you two while I was gone I don't know. I don't care what. But I can guess—finding you two out here together, sneaked away from the post at night. Now, after that . . . You've told her you wanted to marry her. *That's what you're going to do.* You're not going to put it off; you won't spring something about taking her out to Edmonton or Ottawa; you won't be given any benefit of the doubt. You'll marry her here at Endurance! Before you leave! You'll either do that, or I'll come down there to your

cabin and I'll settle with you the way you thought I was going to do tonight!"

He turned on his heel and left them.

As he went out along the slope toward the post, he was realizing, with bitterness of heart, that his sacrifice eighteen months ago, the greatest sacrifice a man can be called upon to make, had been worse than futile. It had cost him dearly, it had brought pain to Joyce, it had brought them tonight to their hour of separation. And yet, through his bitter mood ran the knowledge that in his sacrifice he had set all personal desires aside and had kept faith with a partner dead and had held sacred his promise to Curt Spaulding, until Elizabeth herself had made that promise impossible of fulfillment.

His finale with her a few moments ago seemed to have awakened all the haunting and anguishing memories of that fatal patrol eighteen months ago. He saw Curt coming into his cabin, where he was laid up by a bullet from a drunken 'breed. He remembered their talk about a Tinneh camp stricken with malignant influenza; and remembered his fearful responsibility of having to send his partner, his closest friend on earth, on that dangerous patrol of mercy and stern duty. And the fortnight of terrific storms howling down from the Arctic, and his growing conviction that some disaster had overtaken Curt, and his lone-handed trip eastward into the Barrens to find and rescue his comrade.

Again he lived over that hour when he came upon a trapper's deserted, snow-drifted hut, and found Curt there, stricken with the disease, with both lungs frozen, deserted by his treacherous Indian helper, dying as valiantly as he had lived. He felt that no man on earth could understand the emotions that racked him as he knelt beside the bunk, whispering to a partner who was

going down into the dark, leaving a sister penniless, alone in the savage North.

"Alan, she loves—you," he could hear those broken whispers that presently were stilled. "If you'd marry her—my sister, Alan . . . I wouldn't mind—going—if I could think of you—partner and brother too——" And over and over again that dying whispered plea, and the ineffable peace that came when Alan made covenant, "I will, I will, Curt. I love her too, because she's your sister."

And now, as he thought of that lone funereal sled-trip home, and as he glanced up the slope toward Curt's towering lobstick, his lips fashioned silently:

"I tried, Curt. You wouldn't have asked more of me than what I did. But it couldn't be, it couldn't be."

Joyce had helped Bill take her personal baggage down to the wharf, and had talked over with him final arrangements about forwarding the peltry to Edmonton and selling the trading store. Waiting for the steamer, she had quietly stepped out of Mrs. Drummond's house into the garden back of it, telling no one where she had gone.

She was aware that Alan intended to come down before she left, for half an hour with her. She had slipped out in the garden to make that impossible. If he came down to the wharf at the last moment, she felt she could say good-bye calmly enough, with a brief hand-clasp, a *voyageur's* nod and *bon chance;* but a longer time with him would be unbearable.

The candles of the post had been snuffed out one by one. Down the river, just below the timbered headland, she saw the twinkling lights of the L. & H. steamer beating steadily up toward Endurance. The night was very dark for a summer night in the North. The heavy

storm clouds, overhead now, had shut out all the star gleam and the lingering after-glow of the sun.

The cool sweet rain-wind, beating against her, fluttering her hair and dress, was refreshing to Joyce in her feverish mood. Her talk with Father Claverly, an hour ago in his study, had thrown her back into an uncertainty that was torture. He had destroyed all the defenses she had built up at so heavy a cost. In his gentle deep-seeing way he had got the truth from her, the full truth of her former intimacy with Alan, the truth of her love, and of her victory over the old agony of wanting Alan. His gentle reproaches still echoed in her ears:

"Joyce, you've retreated within yourself, you've hardened yourself. Joyce, in so far as you make pain and suffering of spirit impossible to you, in that same measure you make happiness, also, impossible. I have a trader friend who built his home in a deep hollow where he is sheltered from winter blizzards. But Joyce, he had shut out the sun of summer, too! If you refuse to hope, with all the uncertainty and pain that go with hoping, then you'll be walking in shadows all your life.

"I don't think you ought to leave without giving Alan some hint of how you feel. It would go against your pride as a girl, but you'll be making a tragic mistake if you don't. I think, I *know,* that if he had any hope of you, he'd ask Elizabeth to release him. She's made him bitterly unhappy; he's realizing their marriage would be a tragedy. It isn't that he's been unsteady in affection; in his deepest heart he's been loyal to you all along. Won't you give him a chance to tell you so?"

Joyce knew that Father Claverly would never say these things to her if he were not sure of them beyond

any earthly doubt. He had made her realize that only her pride, only her relentless determination not to hope and never again to "look back," stood between her and Alan. Cast upon her old struggle, with all her defenses destroyed, she was in an agony of uncertainty, her heart a battle-ground of warring emotions.

As she stood there, half-hidden by an arbor of morning-glories, she saw a dim figure come out along the slope from the direction of the woods edge, and as it passed her, scarcely a dozen feet away, she recognized Alan. He went on to the factor's house. She heard him knock, heard him ask for her, heard his puzzled "That's odd," when Mrs. Drummond said she'd been gone for half an hour.

In a strange mood, with her pride beating down the impulse to let him know where she was, she watched him hurry across the terrace to Father Claverly's study. A few moments later he came out, disappeared in the darkness down toward the wharf; and when he failed to find her there, he came back up toward his cabin.

By a lightning flash Joyce saw him as he started on past her. Something in his manner, in his dejected head, in his slow beaten gait, let her know he was aware she deliberately had gone away in these last minutes and deliberately had shunned a parting talk with him.

The lightning flash revealed the bandage she had put around his forehead, and his maimed hand, his arm in a sling. . . . The vision of him driving across that deadly open water, of him taking those rifle bullets into his own body to save her, rose before Joyce vivid as this white light flooding the terrace. That night two years ago, here on this very spot beside the morning-glories, when she returned to him and they talked

of plans for a life together, came back to her with all its haunting, poignant memories.

He was walking listlessly, in some dull uncaring mood. . . . He was going past her. . . . Joyce felt, she *knew,* that he would not come down to the wharf; that he would not see her again, believing she preferred it so. . . .

The darkness fell again, like a black curtain. His dim figure was slowly vanishing from her. A great battle rose in Joyce; a fierce swift tumult racked her. . . . To call out to him and bring him to her; to be silent and let him go into the darkness. If she called, he would come to her; if she kept silent now, she would never see him again, would never hear his voice again. . . .

As Alan went slowly past the garden, unconscious of the lightning flashes, thinking only that Joyce, who had burned his picture and his gift, was now refusing a last hour with him, he heard a voice in the windy blackness. It sounded like his name. In surprise he whirled toward the arbor of morning-glories, and as he stood there, listening, he heard it again—his name —Joyce's voice, half-sobbing:

"Alan! Don't—don't go. . . . I'm—I'm here. . . ."

CHAPTER XXVI : THE RIVER'S CALL

As SHE worked on a report that evening in the little library nook, Joyce would pause now and then and listen intently, with her dark eyes peering into the blackness outside the window.

It was time for Alan to be returning with Bill and Ped from a patrol down the Mackenzie. In the sharp vigorous gusts of October wind she kept thinking she heard the drone of the launch. Leaning forward to the pane she would try to look down upon the great river, but the early night had fallen, black and swirling, and she could not see beyond the shaft of candle light.

Across the room from her, on a blanket-padded couch, little Marion Montgomery had fallen asleep over a picture book, her tiny moccasins kicked off, one arm hanging over the couch. In the deep dreamless sleep of babyhood the little tot was oblivious of the threat and snarl of autumnal wind swirling around the cabin. If there was any sacrifice in having that airy little companion in her home, Joyce had not yet become aware of it. She often thought there was more truth than jest in a Norman trader's rough joke—that she and Alan had "got away to the flyingest start I ever heerd of."

Listening tonight to the October wind which heralded the seven-months winter, Joyce wondered just what that trader would have to say next spring when the snow geese came again and April softened the trees with buds. . . .

The report she was working on was a statement to

her former bureau chief in Ottawa of the money expended in her work among the Indian women around Endurance. Her years at the Alooska trading store had given her an intimate knowledge of Tinneh life in all its raw reality. She knew that even the barest elements of hygiene and nursing and home-making would be a leaven of inestimable worth among the nomad tribes; and her bureau chief, interested in her ideas, had wheedled a thousand dollars out of the Indian department for her use. Fairly launched on her pioneer enterprise, she was looking forward with all her spirited enthusiasm to a busy zestful winter.

During a lull in the wind she suddenly heard the unmistakable sound of the big Police boat skimming up the wave-tossed Mackenzie. Putting aside her report, Joyce ceased being Deputy Indian Agent at Fort Endurance, N. W. T., and became the wife of Inspector Baker, Officer Commanding there. With a glance at the sleeping tot she flung a cape about her shoulders and went out the cabin and ran down the dark wind-swept terrace toward the wharf.

There was a light in Mrs. Drummond's kitchen; but the guest room where Elizabeth Spaulding had lived had been dark these many months. In the trading hall Factor Drummond was outfitting three half-breed assistants who were going westward into the wilderness for the winter to buy up peltry. In the hospital annex Father Claverly was working over a stoical-faced young Loucheux who had been mauled by a bear and brought in half-dead. The gaunt big Police barracks was ablaze with cheerful lights. The two field detachments had been recalled; the post numbered eleven men, all of them seasoned northern men except Burgoon. Whipple had gone long since; for a reason which Alan had confided only to Joyce, he had helped

the forlorn constable get transferred to a small detachment in the Peace River country.

As she waited there in the darkness, listening to the great river beat upon its shore and feeling the kiss of its wind-driven spume against her cheek, she experienced a profound wish that she would never in her life wander far from the sound of those mighty waters marching eternally on to their goal in the Arctic. It called to the spirited and wild-born in her nature, and its voice spoke to her of all the illimitable freedom of these far-flung spaces, these unpeopled wastes.

When the yellow eye of the launch drew near, Joyce saw a tall figure step upon the prow half-deck and stand ready with the painter chain. His slicker glistened wet; water trickled from his hat brim and dropped from the muzzle of his rifle. . . . Joyce could imagine the slap of angry waves, the hurtling spume of white-caps, during Pedneault's reckless hundred-mile drive up the great river. As she watched that tall commanding figure, standing so easily on the tossing half-deck, sharing the work and hardships with his subordinates, the realization swept over Joyce afresh, as a circumstance which still held its wonder for her and could never become dulled or without the power to quicken her heart, that she was Alan's wife and that he and she, in the cabin up the terrace, had made their home together.

When he jumped out upon the planking, jerked the launch alongside and lapped the painter around a pier-head, he turned to her, hat in hand, reproaching her:

"Girl, girl, you shouldn't have come down here, in this raw wet wind. You've got to begin learning to be careful——"

Pedneault snapped off the launch searchlight; and as the two men began gathering their packs together, in

the mantling darkness Joyce silenced Alan's reproach, rising on tiptoe, oblivious of his wet slicker and the cold steel of his gun buckle.

As they went up the slope with Bill and Ped, Alan told her of dodging aside up the Alooska to visit Larry, and of their taking him on a hunting trip to cheer him up a bit. His prospects for the winter trading were good; he had given out a lot of "debt" to the nomad bands, and they were sure to bring their peltry to their former *Shagalasha* friend. But Larry was blue at times, when he saw strong men coming and going on wilderness trails. . . .

After supper, when Alan had made himself regimental again after the six-days hard patrol, he stepped out into the living room where Joyce was finishing her report. By the candle glow in the nook he watched her for a moment, frowning at the contrary figures, struggling to make so small a fund cover so huge a territory. The dancing glow from the fireplace was tangled in her hair, and when she glanced up at him the reflection of it sparkled in her dark eyes. For this evening of his homecoming she had put on the blue velveteen suit she knew he liked. As he stood for a moment or two, looking at her, he thought of those times during the eighteen months of their estrangement when he had sat in that library niche thinking of Joyce, with this cabin cold and lonesome, with his future so bleak and so abysmally different from what it now was.

She beckoned him over to her, holding out several letters which had come for him on the Chipewyan mail. She had not opened them; but now when he brought a chair beside her, she read them with him.

Buzzard had dashed off a page from his apartment address in Winnipeg. He had "done" a couple dozen fairs and pumpkin shows in his new DeHavilland, but

had found that line too tame. Right now he was flying the Winnipeg-Edmonton lap of the Air Mail. Next spring he was going to boss the "smoke hawk" division of the Manitoba Fire Prevention, with a circus of ten scouting planes under him.

Sometime this winter [he postscripted], we might put skis on the crate and hop down north to visit you. But Alan, you find out first if Joyce holds anything against me for telling you she burned that rainbow scarf. I don't think she ever has forgiven me.

Joyce looked up, laughing, but with a catch in her voice as she remembered that haunting day.

"Did you notice the 'we,' Alan? He puts her into a postscript! She's just a mere afterthought! Who is she?"

"Louise of Kamloops is all I know," Alan answered. He was remembering those times when he and Buzzard, lighting on some wilderness lake or river to get a hasty meal, would sit on the cockpit edge and smoke a cigarette and say never a word about the thing most intimate in their lives.

The next envelope was an enigma. It contained no message, no writing—nothing but two pictures. One was a panorama of a large country estate, with lawns, servant quarters, gardens, orchards. The other showed an imposing town residence, a stone building overrun by ivy, with a limousine waiting in the driveway.

Bewildered, Alan looked at the pictures twice, searched in the envelope for a possible note, glanced again at the address. And then, as he studied the crest of the envelope, he started a little. This was from Elizabeth! That insigne was the Lamroth-Haskell crest! Since Haskell married her and they left the North, they had written to no one at Endurance; but

Alan had heard that Haskell, transferred to a small detachment in the Kootenay coal fields, had resigned and gone east.

Suddenly understanding the pictures, Alan looked up and met Joyce's eyes, and he saw that she too understood. In a kind of scorn she remarked:

"That's like Elizabeth, isn't it, Alan? She wants you to realize she's got a country estate and town house and uniformed chauffeur and all the things that—that——"

"Say it!" Alan bade. "—All the things I'd never been able to give her. She's trying to rub it in. Yes, it's like her, Joyce."

"Sometimes I pity her a little—with *him,* Alan." Joyce was thinking of that incident between herself and Haskell up the Big Alooska—of Haskell's easy conscience, his lack of scruples, his inhumanity toward her father.

"I wouldn't say that, Joyce. I knew her better than you did. I'd say, God pity him—with *her!*"

With a gesture of finality he flipped the pictures contemptuously into the fireplace.

The third letter came from division headquarters. Besides the usual orders and routine papers, the letter contained a short personal note addressed to both of them from Williamson, and an official appointment of William L. Hardsock to the rank of duty sergeant.

As her eyes scanned that document and the meaning of it dawned on her, Joyce gave a little cry of gladness. The promotion was largely Alan's work; Alan had got that for Bill. She could never think of Bill's sturdy devotion to her in her darkest hours and of his loyalty to Alan, without fervently longing to make him some precious gift. And now to Bill, plunging into his work, no whit bitter or rueful but cheerful and

happy-go-lucky as ever, there could be no more precious gift than the paper she held in her hands.

She suggested eagerly: "Don't tell him about this, Alan, till . . . Let's have him and Ped come up to supper tomorrow and tell him then."

Alan smiled as he pictured Joyce laying the document in front of Bill on a tray, and imagined Bill's huge reactions. At least he had paid a small part of the debt which both he and Joyce owed to Bill.

Later that evening, when the lights of the post were out, when the fire logs had burned to red coals and Joyce had carried her sleepy little charge away to bed, they went outside the cabin, drawn unconsciously by the sense of something momentous happening. As they stepped out, they stopped suddenly, in silent astonishment. The terrace was carpeted white; the first snow of autumn had come. The wind which had brought the snow clouds down from the Arctic had died to a whisper, but the great river down the slope still beat and splashed against its shores. In great fluffy flakes the snow was falling; through the yellow shaft of light from the alcove window, it came drifting down as softly as white feathers.

Flinging the shoulder of his greatcoat around Joyce, Alan drew her nearer him to shield her from the chill. With his arm about her, he stood watching, caught up with her in some strange awe.

Far across the river they heard the howl of a huge wolf from some pine knoll, and heard answering cries, mere pin-points of sound, from distant peaks back in that region of pine hills. As they listened to this call of the gathering pack, they imagined the snow noiselessly covering the moss and dim game trails of that wilderness where they had spent their honeymoon.

In the night sky they heard the honking of Arctic geese, last of the migrants, winging swiftly south; and they had the feeling that in the illimitable woods all furry creatures were seeking out warm dens and storing food for the Frozen Moons. Up and down the wilderness rivers and far-flung over the Strong-Woods, a whisper had gone abroad of a mighty change brooding—a whisper that drove less courageous things into headlong flight, yet was but a challenge to those more valiant of heart. The spirit of winter was in the air tonight; and Alan and Joyce were welcoming it. Here in the far North they had lived through other winters; they knew the savagery of those Moons and their white silent beauty too. They had work to keep them busied during the long Dark, and a home against the blind swirling blizzards, and the vista of a life together here in this far land of their choosing.

THE END

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